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RETREAT & OTHER STORIES

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

RETREAT

MANGO	2
THE HAND	13
BOCA DE AGUA	25
DOWN BY THE RIVER	38
THE ARRIVAL	44
WHEN TROUBLE TEK YOU	56
THE BURIAL	64
IJO	75

OTHER STORIES

THE CLOTH OF CONTENTION	82
THE MKUNGA OF MOUZALAND	100

MANGO

Nestled in the hills of Saint Mary, sits a small village called Retreat. It is well hidden behind a stand of tall bamboo trees facing the Wag River. The river is the village's only inlet and outlet. There are no paved roads leading into the village, just footpaths along the mountains edges, best traveled only in single file. Wild flowers and clumped bushes of berries trace the footpaths along with thick yam vines that grow on the sharp foothills. The village homes are scattered between banana, pimento, cocoa and breadfruit trees and mighty coconut trees menace the sun.

Everyone in Retreat knows little Olive Grant, the mango lover, the tree climber. Her long slender legs and gregarious nature had earned her these titles. Particularly proud of her climbing abilities Olive would often tag the other village children to race her up a tree and then she would run off, anticipating the chase, saying, "only a monkey can climb up dat tree faster than me and no monkeys live in Jamaica." And nothing pleased her more than to sit in a mango tree eating its plump and juicy fruit, and according to Olive, Retreat had the best mangos in all of Jamaica.

"You Olive Grant! Get down from dat mango tree and come sweep up de yard." Mima called out as she emerged from the kitchen wiping her stout brown hands in the plaid cloth wrapped around her waist.

"Ah Mima, Ah'm comin'," Olive answered as mango juices lined down her long slender arm, dripping on the floral dress that she wore.

"Lawd, have mercy! Now look what you done to de dress dat Miss Mona jus' made for you. Mango all over de dress!"

The small black girl perched on the limb of the mango tree looked yearningly at her grandmother's burning brown face and at the stained dress. Shrugging her shoulders, she continued to eat the succulent fruit.

"Dis is the sweetest mango ever to grow on a tree," Olive exclaimed, licking the juices running down her arms.

"How can you tell which mango sweeter dan the other," Mima replied, "when all you do is stuff your belly one mango after de other."

Mima turned towards the house but sensing that Olive had not moved from the limb of the tree, she turned around and walked back over to the mango tree.

"Jus' get down from dat mango tree and sweep up de yard."

Olive picked a few more mangoes, tied them up in the skirt of her dress and climbed down the tree swinging from limb to limb.

Mima went inside the kitchen to finish cutting up a fancy assortment of fruits that Olive had brought home from her traverse through the mountains and plains. She sliced guavas to make guava jelly; peeled sour sop to make juices and arranged plums, apples, guineps, oranges and tangerines in a big bowl on the table.

Olive climbed down the tree and placed her mangoes on the porch of the house. She went further in the yard breaking branches and grass to sweep with. Alongside the yard was a spacious garden with high edges of lavender and rosemary bushes, honeysuckles, ivy and rose bushes growing on a tall dark wooden fence. A few mango trees stood at the end of the garden near were the lemongrass and *khus khus* grow. As she swept, she whistled, waving the self-made broom around the ground stirring up a

thick grey dust. The two dogs that were sleeping under the house awakened and ran towards her.

“Busta! Sangsta!” Olive greeted the dogs running between the two dogs and dancing around them. The dogs became excited jumping up and down, barking loudly with Olive as she spins her broom stirring up the soil.

The barking of the dogs caught Mima’s ears; she could not see Olive or the dogs but by the barking of the dogs and the fog in the window, she could well imagine what Olive was up to. She dashed out to find a cloud of dust that resembled the aftermath of a speeding card down a dry dusty road.

“You Olive!”, she called fanning the dust from her face, coughing. “Where are you?”

“Out here in de yard,” answered Olive, whom Mima could now see swirling the bush broom around on the dry ground and romping with the dogs in a cloud of dust.

“Olive, you leave dem dogs alone an’ stop rakin’ up de yard. I ask you to sweep not to stampede like a wild wind. Look at all de dust you done stir up. Wet de ground before you sweep it,” Mima urged.

Olive looked at her grandmother, rolled her eyes, sucked her teeth and marched to the porch, muttering. She slammed herself into a chair, arms folded and slide down until she all but sat on her shoulder blades.

“Now, look here young lady.” Mima spoke firmly. “Dis attitude is going to make me stamp your inside out.”

Mima waited only a heartbeat moment for Olive to response and scolding waved her finger towards Olive.

“You have not finish wid what I ask you to do.”

Olive knew danger when she heard it and bolted out of the chair and into the yard to finish sweeping. At the side of the house, there was a barrel of water and she scooped out some with the calabash floating on top and began to sprinkle the dry ground and the dust started to settle. The dogs ran back under the house to avoid the water. As she worked she muttered to herself complaining of all the chores she had to do. Her days were filled with errands from foothill to plains, carrying water from the river, bringing lunches to the men in the fields, delivering messages between households and well as vials of her grandmother’s medicinal potions to heal the sick or rid the possessed of their woes of love and spirits. Olive did not mind the errands she had to run as they kept her moving from place to place and during these intervals, she would often spend climbing trees and sampling fruits.

Soon her mood changed and Olive began to whistle as she worked. Mima stuck her head out of the kitchen window as Olive went about doing her.

“A whistlin’ woman and a crowin’ hen is an abomination to the Lawd,” she glared at Olive with her beady eyes.

Olive scrambled further in the yard for safety. She knew her grandmother too well and did not want to face any additional scrutiny. But Mima soon found another chore for Olive to do.

“Olive! Come go a shop.”

“Comin, Mima!”

This pleased Olive and she sprinted to the porch to greet her grandmother.

“Tell Miss Mavis to send a pound of flour and t’ree cigars for me ‘til Monday. And don’t tarry down a de shop. Come back to help me cook de evening meal before night come.”

Olive didn’t wait to hear Mima’s last remarks, she scooted happily down the stoned path on her way to the village shop. As she approached the last bend on the path, she heard music in the distance and quickened her pace. Olive waltzed to the beat of the music right into the shop, greeting Mavis, the shopkeeper, a stout brown woman, sitting behind an old wooden counter.

“Good evenin’, Miss Mavis.”

“Good evening, Miss Olive”, Mavis mimicking Olive, and laughing out loudly. “Dough it’s not quite evening yet.”

Olive frowned.

‘Mima say, could you please send a pound of flour and t’ree cigarettes. An not to worry ‘bout the bill, she’ll settle it nex’ week.”

Mavis turned around, scowling at Olive.

“You tell Mima,” Mavis spoke slowly and deliberately. “Come Monday, Ah settlin’ all accounts in de store and no more cigars on credit.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Olive replied slowly and walked away from the counter.

At first glance into the adjoining Rum Bar, Olive only saw the jukebox that was playing the music and slipped stealthily in the bard. She sauntered towards the music, twirling her slender hips, and making quick feet. Throwing her head back, she did some fancy steps and spun around only to come face to face with two men who sat silently at the Bar, sipping rum and fete of Olive’s feet.

Dismayed and humiliated, Olive ran back to the other side of the Shop where the flour and cigarettes were awaiting for her on the counter. She grabbed them, fleeing the scene and did not stop running until she reached the porch of the house.

“Is dat you, Olive?” Mima asked from inside the house. “Why you runnin’ so gal? Duppy frighten you?”

“Ah running cause you tell me not to tarry,” Olive responded. “And de shop full a men drinkin’ rum.”

Mima was now on the porch wiping her hands in her apron, then extending one hand to Olive for the cigars. Olive handed her the flour instead.

“Put de flour in de kitchen. Gimme me de other t’hing.” Mima countered. “I could use a good draw ‘bout now. You sure have stirred up enough trouble today.”

Olive observed her grandmother cautiously.

“Humph! Ah gonna tell Beba you been smoking,” she returned, pouted lips and walked away without handing her Mima the cigars.

Mima was staggered by Olive’s defiance and behavior but soon understood Olive’s displeasure with her. Going to the shop to get cigars for Mima and sharing this the one secret with her since Mima never smokes her cigars in company made Olive feel close to her grandmother but she did not the dry cough that kept Mima awake most nights. Mima shouldn’t be smoking, she thought and if Beba found out, he would try to make her stop. After all, it was for Mima’s well-being and health.

As Olive passed by on her way towards the pantry to put the flour away, Mima caught the tail end of her skirt and spun her around to face her.

“You know Olive, All day long you’ve been actin’ like a big dundo head.” Mima warned. “If Ah lick you behind good, you won’t be able to sit on for t’hree months.”

Held sternly and stiffly, Olive could not wriggle herself out of the trouble that her belligerence had gotten her and lowered held head to avoid her grandmother’s garish eyes.

“Now,” Mima continued, eyeing Olive cautiously. “Where de cigars?”

Olive handed over the cigars wrapped in a small brown paper bag and Mima loosened her reins on Olive’s dress, taking the cigars and eased herself in the rocking chair on the porch. When Olive turned to leave, Mima commanded her to sit, so she turned around and sat in the exact place where she had just stood by her Mima’s feet.

“You know Olive,” Mima began thoughtfully. There was a serious tone to Mima’s voice that told Olive that a long story would follow.

“Dat was jus’ de t’ing dat happened to Anansi, the spider,” Mima continued after lighting one of the cigars and puffing a few puffs. “Anansi t’ought he had de best idea in all de world to collect wisdom He t’ought if he collected all the wisdom in de would be de wisest and most powerful. So everywhere he go he would collect wisdom. He catch from de sky, from de trees, de birds and de bees and he put it in a calabash pot. When he t’ink dat he ‘ave all de wisdom, he decide to go hide it so he wouldn’t have to share. He found a sycamore tree and decided dat dis was de best spot, to hide de wisdom among its branches.

Mima paused to puff on cigar and Olive waited patiently and alertly, listening to the deep heave that Mima’s chest made when she pulled the smoke into her mouth.

“So he tried to climb de sycamore tree wid de calabash in him hand but it was a big struggle. He put de calabash in his right han’ and tried to climb. But he would fall down. He put de calabash in his left han’ and tried again to climb de tree but him fall down again. Every time Anansi tried climbing de tree, poor Anansi would just fall down.”

Olive as growing impatient with the story as Mima takes another cigar break.

“All dis time, Anansi’s little daughter was quietly watching him trying to get up the tree. After several attempts, the little girl walked over to her father and said: ‘Papa, if you tie up de calabash on your back, then you can climb de tree.’ Anansi stopped and laughed at his little girl, ridiculing the child, ‘What do you know, child? Don’t you know dat I jus’ collected all de wisdom in de world? Be off with you, child?’

Mima halted again for a few more puffs on the cigar before she continued the story. Olive looked into her face that was clouded by the cigar smoke and noticed small beads of sweat on the woman’s brown skin.

“When the poor child ran off, Anansi thought and thought; he looked at the calabash and looked at de tree and thought some more,” Mima began again, rocking gently in the chair. “Den he took a sash dat he had around his waist, placed the calabash on his back and then tied the sash around his body and dehn he saw dat his hands were free to climb de tree.”

“Ok, so Anansi climbed de tree,” Olive stated trying to push the story aside.

“Yes indeed he did,” but wen Anansi reach to de top of de tree and sat down wid his calabash of wisdom, he became angry. He was vex. You know Anansi was vex?” Mima asked her arms dropping to the side of the rocking chair.

“Cause he is a fool,” Olive answered quickly, laughing.

Mima stopped rocking and looked at her granddaughter, pensively, but Olive could not stop laughing, she cuddled her knees trying to stop herself and began rocking as if she was sitting in Mima’s chair.

“Anansi was angry because he t’ought he had collected all de wisdom in de world,” Mima informed leaning back in the rocking chair, “and here it was, his little child had de wisdom and insight to figure out how to limb de tree with the calabsh of wisdom.”

Olive nodded her head eagerly. “So what did Anansi do after he climbed the tree,” she asked.

“Well, Anansi was so vexed, he kicked de calabash of wisdom off de tree and de wisdom spread all over de ground,” Mima concluded in a much lighter tone.

“Well, Ah sure hoped he was smart enough to put a little in his pocket when he got off dat tree,” Olive commented. “Cause Anansi don’t have much common sense.”

On the note, Olive got up and went into the kitchen to put away the flour and to contemplate the meaning behind the story and the lesson that her grandmother was trying to teach. Olive loved her maternal grandmother’s wise storytelling usually with a wonderful sense of humor, which it seems to be lacking this morning. Soon tears welled her eyes and she left the kitchen and crawled underneath the house where the dogs slept to escape any the prospect of another long story and any further annoyance with Mima.

Mima had fallen asleep on the porch, head lolled back in her rocking chair when from under the house, Olive heard the beat of goatskin drums, conch shells, and cowbells,

whistles, and horns in the distance. Voices of merriment rang through the air and in a magical minute, her spirits soared and she felt free again.

“Junkunoo dancers!,” she exclaimed.

Crawling out from the spot under the house, Olive sneaked passed Mima out of the yard and down the stoned path where she knew they would turn off to towards the village square. As the parade of singing and dancing approached, Olive stood waiting with exhilaration to see the procession of men, women and children dressed in their colorful masks and costumes. As the music grew louder, Olive was enticed with the merriment and soon her small feet were doing all kinds of intricate steps, her body in rhythm with the beat. Revelers on the sidelines were singing and dancing along and soon Olive leaped, jumped and danced into the heart of the action, throbbing to the rhythm of the music. By the time, they reached the village square, people laughed good naturedly at her as she strutted and pranced around and through the crowd, imitating some of the dancers while creating some of her own movements.

Olive moved around the crowd dancing, prancing, whirling, twirling her body all over. A group of the village children gathered admiringly around her as she whirled about. Some elders joined the children clapping their hands for Olive. Her little brown feet twinkled in and out of the fringe. The music was deafening and Olive did not hear when one of her friends was trying to tell her. She caught one of the beautifully colored cardboard masks that procession threw to the crowd, waving it in front of her face, laughing and dancing.

Hours later when the troupe of the Junkunoo dancers began to move on with the procession, Olive was still dancing. The people of Retreat expressed their gratitude with

gifts and cheered them on their way. Olive still entranced in the dance thought the applause was for her and continued to dance with the music and others. A few of the villagers walked with the procession a short way filling their hats and baskets with goods and other gifts. Olive still captivated by the music and merriment pirouetted down the village road unto the main road with the soul-stirring music jamboree.

Meanwhile Mima had awakened from her afternoon nap on the porch and called for Olive. The house was quiet and she imagined Olive might be still brooding somewhere.

“You Olive Grant! Get down from dat mango tree and come go to de spring!”

There was no answer, not a stir of breeze in the trees.

“Olive? You hear me?” Mima called again.

There was still no answer, only the faint sound of goatskin drums to be heard in the distance.

Mima wiped the sweat from her brows and hobbled back into the kitchen.

“Lawd!,’ she sighed. “Dat child is going to be the death of me.

THE HAND

Rumor was that Henry was sleeping around with Lola, a living harlot if you ever saw one, but his wife Vi was keeping her distance from the other women for the sake of peace at home with her husband. But just last week, an incident occurred that still sat painfully on Vi's chest like gas waiting to be belched. That day, she allowed the rumoring whispers of the women to frustrate her so that she lost the composure that she had managed to maintain over the fortnight when the rumor first surfaced.

The women were at the riverside washing and scrubbing clothes when Lola swaying her sweet ass emerged from the path with a pail and a small layer of lingerie placed delicately across her arm. Her brown smooth sweaty face broke into a smile when she saw Vi sitting top naked on a rock, knees to her chest soaking up the sun.

"Min' de sun give you a stroke, Miss Vi," she taunted as she sauntered into the river. "Or dry you up like a raisin."

Vi frowned and sucked her teeth, sending a long and loud spit out the side of her mouth. The two women didn't have any malice in the past and were always polite to one another until now that Lola decided to take up with Vi's Henry. Their previously cordial relationship was now torn asunder. Even so, Vi was startled by Lola's public display and apparent mockery of her. For an awkward moment, the waterfalls echoed a deafening sound as the two women stared ferociously at each other. The children and women in the river awaited Vi's response.

"Wha happen, Vi? Cat got your tongue," Mavis, a stout woman laughed.

"Frog in your throat?" Blossom, a young woman jeered.

“Henry a give you bun,” Mavis continued. “Ah neva know you to be at a loss for words.”

Vi watched as Lola undressed as she turned to lather her body with coconut oil soap in the middle of the river. Her eyes rested on Lola’s naked torso, her slender legs and the two thick black plaits that glistened in the sun. She was smooth and supple with plenty of ass and breast promising a mountain of guava sweetness. Vi could see what appealed to men but her blood boiled like the hot pea soup when she thought of Henry and Lola sweating in bed.

Aware that Vi gawked at her and the body she carried, Lola sang in a lovely brass voice:

“A man is a man
A man is a man
Black man or Chinese man
A man is a man
Whether him face look
Like a frying pan
Any man can give you
Satisfaction.”

Wincing, Vi glanced at the sun, whose rays now softened in the heat, her heart heavy and sweat covering her body. She pulled up a plain floral print dress to her chest, slipping her arms through the sleeves. A gentle breeze blew, spraying her face and hands with the mist from the waterfalls.

“Ah wan’ to give you a warnin’,” Vi tossed a rebuking look at Lola, hands akimbo. “Leave mi man alone!”

“You should tell you man to leave mi alone,” Lola retorted. “A him come knocking on mi door. Ah guess, him come for what him not getting at home.”

That was when all the commotion started. Vi sprang off the rock like a broken branch from a coconut tree landing on Lola's wet soapy back; legs sealed tight around her body, one hand around her neck; throwing her face down in the river. The women wrestled, each trying to drown the other. Despite the piercing of the river stones beneath their feet, they hurled and lunged at each other, Vi's big boned body against Lola's heaving bosom. The villagers at the river gathered around them, roaring support, billowing and peppering each row as the women rise and fall, jumping and pulling each other, coughing and spitting for air.

That was last Tuesday, and in the week since that day, Vi carried her heart in her chest like it weighed a ton of bricks. All that she could think of was her man, Henry, with Lola. She walked through the village of Retreat with her head hung in shame. She is not a bad-looking woman, reddish brown complexion; thick black hair, big boned body but a chest as flat as the bottom of basin. But it was the way Vi walked - feet dancing in the soil, hips swaying from side to side - that caught Henry's eyes many years ago.

The first time that Henry had finally caught up with Vi seven years before, they rolled in the grass under a grapefruit tree in the middle of the cow pasture, talking, laughing and making love in some nearby bushes for most of the afternoon into early evening. Henry, a broad chested man with curly hair and skin like mango, had a boyish face and lips that curled up like when a child doesn't want to eat something.

Vi and Henry married soon after that when she convinced him that she was with child. The first years of marriage were pleasant enough although no child came. Henry was a good husband and worked hard to please Vi whose needs were plentiful. He spent most of his time planting a lush vegetable garden with callaloo, cabbage, cucumber,

chocho, tomato, scotch bonnet pepper, susumber and gungu peas alongside of the house they inherited when Vi's parents passed away.

For the seven years of their marriage, Henry listened to Vi's twisted tales of the unending pregnancies that never matured into a child, loving her when he could and ignoring her as much as she would let him. But when Henry found out from Rose, Vi's sister, that both sisters were born barren, he walked straight up the hill and released a frustrated knock on Lola's door.

When Vi had first heard the rumor, it was fist and fight with Henry all night into a black and blue bruised morning. Two days before the fight, Vi took Henry to the Pentecostal Church of Redemption to repent his adulterous ways in the presence of God and the evangelist pastor as God's witness, who had the perfect scripture for that particular Sunday sermon.

"To preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress," the Pastor spoke slowly and deliberately looking at the congregation gathered in the small makeshift church. "Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes; for the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts down a precious life. Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched? Proverbs Chapter Six, Verses twenty-four to twenty-nine. Amen. Praise the Lord!"

"Praise the Lord. Amen!" The congregation responded.

Before the Pastor could close the Bible to place it on the pulpit, Vi grabbed Henry's left hand and marched him up to the pulpit. The congregation broke out in a whisk of whispering. But Vi did not let that bother her. She wanted to let Henry and

everyone in Retreat know that this sort of foolishness was not acceptable and that she was a righteous woman despite what they may think of her antics. They stood facing the Pastor; Henry nervously fixing his tie and pulling up his pants with his one free hand; while Vi stood erect head holding Henry's other hand with all her might. Their backs were to the congregation, whose whispers had grown more intense and loud.

"Pastor Beba," Vi cleared her throat and spoke out above the murmurs. "You know why we here."

The Pastor made a motion to the choir, raising his hand slowly as a conductor gesturing to his orchestra.

"Henry Williams, ah want you to stop sleeping wid dat gal, Lola! And I want him to swear on the Bible!" Vi exclaimed.

The choir broke out in a song to hush the rousing crowd.

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Vi urged. "Hold up your right han' right here and put your left han' on de Bible. Swear this to me!"

That Sunday morning took place three days before the fight at the river and for the next days, the village of Retreat was in frenzy as the rumor became more bizarre. Henry had not kept his part of the bargain so wherever Vi saw Lola, they were involved in an affray, which had become more frequent and popular than the village's Saturday night cock fights. No blood was shed during these physical fights but the conflict between the two women seemed intimate and internal, a matching of wills than any

intended violence towards one another. The villagers even started to place bets and wagers on the next brawl.

“Bets for Vi vs. Lo,” Vi overheard Sherman, the aspiring gambler saying quietly to some of the men one night. “Yes. Yes. Bet any ways. Name the place or the time. Five pence a bet.”

Half of the village of Retreat had stakes in the fight by the time it happened. But not Olive watched the women fighting in the river from the limb of the breadfruit tree on the bank, so upset by the commotion, that she pretended to fall just to distract the woman.

###

Now one week later, as evening falls where mountains meet the sky, the evening mist glistens through the trees under the golden sun where Olive is sitting on the back porch overlooking Vi’s house and the rest of the village of Retreat. Rocking steadily in the chair, she welcomes the soothing tone of her grandfather, Paster Beba, reading scriptures accompanied by the dancing sounds of the evening breeze.

It is an ordinary Wednesday evening that the women of Retreat sit under mango and pear trees shelling pigeon and red peas, grating coconut, sifting flour, soaking rice and catching fires for their evening meals. The leaves rustle where children play in the yard. Vi sits apart from the other women, back against a coconut tree trunk listening to the whispering, gossiping and telling tales of superstitions with unnerving laughter.

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” Beba reads. “Idle lips are his mouth piece.”

Olive frowns at the words that her grandfather speaks softly, not knowing if they are meant for her because she is taking a pause in the evening breeze. Olive looks at her

little hands, which had been busy all day doing the wash, minding the baby, fetching herbs and carrying water and lunch to the men in the fields. She shrugs her shoulders before emanating a gurgling laughter for Beba to know that she is listening and takes no offense should the references be meant for her. Beba kisses his teeth at Olive's laugh and they exchange glances not in vexation but in juxtaposition.

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” Beba pretends to read from the raggedy Bible.

“Look upon a little child.”

“Pity my simplicity,” Olive offers quickly. “Suffer me to come to thee.”

“Hmmm!” Beba retorts.

Olive glances at Beba who brings the old Bible closer to his face, a little embarrassed that he had allowed her to distract him from the preparation of his church sermon. She fixes herself more comfortable in the rocking chair taking in the view of the mountain as the sunsets its majestic orange and purple haze to begin the evening descent into the sea. The breeze blows in the trees, a mongoose scurries in the nearby bushes looking for its last lick of food, a flock of birds fly overhead as Olive dreams of frolicking in the golden water falls in the distance.

“Beba,” she says softly. “Can you tell me a story before night falls?”

“A story, eh?,” Beba replies. “If you listen you will hear many stories in de scriptures.”

“Ah know dat, Beba. Ah hear dem too.” Olive excitedly replies while pointing northward.

“But can you tell me the story about Falene, de wata falls that used to be over dere?”

“Oh, dat story,” Beba answers deliberately. “Now that story can give you a bad dreams, lil lass.”

“Was I born ‘round dat time, Beba?”

“Well, you already born but much too young to remember,” Beba begins, marking a placeholder in the Bible page and turns around from the small desk in the room.

“It was just around the time that Vi and Henry got married. And probably only dem can attest to what really happened on dem falls, as they were honeymooning under the big rock at the riverside dat night and can only tell what dey saw with dere own eyes.”

Beba pauses removing his reading glasses, wiping the lens in the blue cardigan he almost always wears to catch the evening breeze, as he’d say.

”Well, how de story goes is dat a man named Papa Susu from Warrick Castle, de district on de other side of de river, jumped off de falls naked one night. No one knew how and why Papa Susu had jumped.”

Beba gets up from where he is sitting and walks to the door looking off in the distance.

“Some people say duppy frighten him, other people say dat his wife ran him down with a pot of hot cow switch after catching him in bed naked with another woman. Some people say that dem was at de river side dat night when in de middle of de night, a man came screaming over de falls and landed in de deep quiet blue hole of de river.”

Olive gets up and looks further north in the distance where her grandfather is looking. She picks up a small pebble and throws it in the direction of the former falls that is now barren with white marl.

“Was his body on fire, Beba? And dat’s why he jumped?”

“Dat could be possible as well, Olive. But, we really know is dat his body was discovered mid-morning between rivers rocks, when de women and children were in the river washing clothes and bathing.

“An’ so de story goes that his penis was bitten off by de river crawfish, right Beba?” Olive head swells with mystery.

“So de story goes.” Beba confirms.

“That’s why Ah don’t sit too long in de river,” she said thoughtfully. “Ah wouldn’t want no crawfish to bite mi clitoris. Not at, not at all.”

Beba looks at the eight year old girl and shakes his head.

“Is dat one of de big words you learnin’ in school?”

Olive catches herself, nodding quickly at Beba.

Olive has no living memory of Falene, but her mind is intent on it as memories are more ancient than mountains and the absence of the waterfall has always disturbed her. Often Olive would sit on this porch, overlooking Vi’s house listening to Vi’s bickering with Henry, and dream of the beautiful rushing water as it hits the river stream. She walks back to sit in the rocking chair, knees hugging her chest as she tries to release the uninvited fear that captures her body.

Her head feels like its swelling two sizes larger than its size and goose bumps cover her body.

Vi emerges into her yard, slapping the kitchen door wide open with a trail of smoke rising through the banana trees accumulating to the forming evening mist. Vi’s head is tied with a bandana and she is wearing a floral print dress with a stained white

apron on top. She coughs, breathes in the cool evening air and walks over to a tree stump in the yard. She picks up a splitting axe and a piece of wood, places the wood on the tree stump and lunges into it. Putting aside her reflections of the waterfalls, Olive watches from the rocking chair, shuddering as pieces of wood go flying in different directions, sending shards on nearby branches raining to the ground.

Olive can't see what's in Vi's heart. She can only guess. Vi's heart is heavy as she chops away at the wood on the tree stump. She is having a hard time starting the fire to cook the evening meal. The sun is taking its final descent behind the trees and night is approaching. Vi is still young, not quite thirty years, a woman of hopes and expectations, although angry and disappointed. She has taken drastic measures to keep her body looking good; saturating her skin with coconut oil, morning noon and night; eating passion fruit and dabbing essential oils she borrows from a few of the whispering women, eager for a secret to whisper.

She uses every opportunity to try to seduce Henry but Henry is never home long enough to rub his cool hands along her round face or to caress the small of her back. When she tries to rub her body against his, he is not aroused pushes her away to tend to whatever household chores she has asked him to do. And, tonight she is still expecting Henry to come home for dinner.

So this evening, a week after the fight with Lola in the river, Vi decides to butcher their Sunday chicken and prepare stewed chicken with rice and peas instead of the red peas soup or plain stewed peas and rice that she usually makes. The idea of Henry leaving often crosses her mind. But Vi also knew that she can never give Henry children

and the last thing she wants is for Lola to conceive a child for Henry, which is exactly the new rumor brewing.

“What a wicked woman.” Vi mutters.

She does not understand why Henry would want to carry on with Lola and so brazenly and wonders what kind of power does a wonton woman like Lola has on her Henry why he cannot seem to stop knocking on her door and just come home.

A few minutes later, Henry comes in to change his clothes and that is when Vi finds herself in place and time where all hopes are buried. She smells the perfumed soap that Lola uses as Henry enters the yard and knows that he has been with her and is planning on going back.

From her perched on Beba’s porch, Olive watches as Henry, unbuttoning his shirt, walks towards Vi, who is sitting on the veranda. When Henry reaches the door to enter the house, Vi picks up the Bible that she sat on a small table; grabs hold of Henry’s wrist and pull him over to the tree stump where she was chopping wood. She shoves the Bible in his face.

“Henry. Show me which han’ you use to swear on de Bible that you was gonna stop sleeping with dat woman?”

Olive is watching as Henry raises his right hand, nervously like a child with an unsure answer.

“No, Henry!” she corrects. ‘Show me de han’. It’s your left han!”

Vi places the Bible on the tree stump, throwing Henry forward.

“Put your left han’ on that Bible, mek me see it!

Henry places his left hand on the Bible and right hand to heart.

“I swear Vi!”

Vi raises the splitting axe above her head and with one swift movement, chops off Henry’s left hand right off his arm.

“I swear,” is Henry’s last words as his dry eyes roll over in his head, passing out face down on the chopped hand hanging off the Bible.

Olive sits mute throughout the entire ruckus. From the back porch, Olive has a good view of Vi’s house particularly, the veranda and yard. She wants to tell Beba about what she is seeing but everything happens so quickly, she could not find the words fast enough to speak. Olive cannot believe what her eyes are seeing. She is feeling lightheaded and her ears are ringing. She has seen cows and goats slaughtered before, but never in her life has she seen a man’s hand cut from its limb and in sweeping blow of a picking axe. She cannot phantom why Vi would do such an odd and dramatic act. Henry’s arm is bleeding profusely laying limp on the stump. As Olive sees the blood flowing into the ground, all of the color leaves her face. A little blue light goes across her vision, straight from left to right and go up and down the mountain. The mountain village starts spinning and she breaks out into a cold sweat.

“Matthew chapter six verse, “she hears Beba say from inside the house, “But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”

In a sudden drop, Olive passes out on the porch.

###

BOCA DE AGUA

Restless in the night, anchored in a mast, Santos and his cousin, Sonny Boy, left the mountain top village of Retreat in search of work and to find a city to grove in. Santos, a freckled brown-skinned man with a sturdy build had a light and airy gait. His body always seems to tilt in the direction of the wind. Sonny Boy, a stocky clear-skinned man was a couple years younger than his cousin but they had grown up as brothers. The drought had affected the farmlands of the village and the crop had perished for the second season. They traveled along the banks of the Boca De Agua, a deep channel surrounded by towering rocks that reached hundreds of feet to the sky. The lean river flowed dark and clear, luminously with the rays of the moon and sun playing a mischievous dip-and-fall back against the terrestrial landscape of Mount Diablo. They raced each other around the corners of the mountain to break up the monotony and tiresomeness of the long journey.

Santos and Sonny Boy walked most of the night. The night road conditions were not so favorable as volcanic mountains thrust upward, majestic trees loomed ghostly in the darkness limiting the light from the stars to guide the dark road path. Along the way, they made some stops on the road to eat, rest and even bathe in the river where they could gain access without fear of drowning but they never fell asleep. They were hoping to reach Kingston by nightfall on Saturday and soon it would be the dawn of Good Friday. Soon they would see? city walls that would separate their hearths of the fields of Retreat. They set up camp with a small fire roasting fish and yam in the cool moonlight. Sonny Boy leaned back against his crocus bag stuffed in front of large rock. He was craving

sleep and nodded in and out of consciousness. Santos threw pebbles at him as he snored loudly into a nod, jumping forward with each pebble, fanning his face.

The early morning dawned clear and crisp as the mist opened doors and windows of the songs and silences of the night. The Jamaican sun rose as the men heaved a sigh of relief when they reached a wooden post with the name, Boca de Agua, scrawled on it indicating that a village was close. The village was perched precariously on the banks of the river. They threw down their crocus sacks to rest in a cavern by the roadside and soon men and women embarked from misty green paths into the clearing. As the villagers embarked onto the road, they lined up in single file along the curbless side of the road close to the river and waited.

“Mawning,” said one heavy built middle-aged woman.

“Wha’ gwaan?” muttered a slender young brown woman.

“How de conch tu’n out las’ night?” asked the other woman.

“Dem nyaam eh up,” she smiled.

“Eezy mawning,” entered a young black man.

“A who dem dat?” asked the slender young brown woman

“Mi noh know,” replied the younger woman.

“Dem look tired. Mus a wait fi de country bus,” laughed the young black man.

Santos and Sonny Boy, who were on the mountainside of the road, watched the villagers curiously, waiting for them to acknowledge and call out to them. As more villagers embarked onto the road, taking their places in line, they greeted one or two of the others glancing oddly at the two men on the opposite side of the road. Santos could hear bits and pieces of the conversation and while he took pleasure in listening to their tattletales, he

was also gaining insight that the villagers were waiting for the morning Tramcar that would take them to work in Spanish Town and other areas in and outside of Kingston. When he realized that they were waiting on the wrong side of the road if they were to jump on the tram when it arrived, Santos nudged Sonny Boy and they grabbed their bags and crossed the road to join the line, which was growing quickly.

A pick-up wagon rolled up to the front of the line, slowing down to a halt.

“Mi can tek t’ree.,” the light-skinned driver called out to the people in the front of the line.

“Goin’ as far as Sligoville?” asked a newcomer, who didn’t bother to join the growing line.

Two of the women looked inside the front of the wagon at the other people who occupied the seats and stepped back looking down the road to see what else was in sight. Santos and Sonny Boy picked up their crocus sacks and began to walk to the front of the line. As they approached the wagon, three young men debauched from one of the village paths and jumped into the back of the wagon.

“ A t’ree ah wee,” one of them said.

He had a cool black complexion with an easy smile. Easing his limber body in the coup of the wagon he turned and smiled at Santos and Sonny Boy, who looked on dejectedly. Resting his elbows on top of the wagon bed, he sternly slapped his big black hands on its the exterior.

“Roll on, driva,” said the young man wearing a red shirt as he knelt in to the wagon close to the driver.

Santos kept his eyes on the young man in the red shirt, as the wagon rolled slowly on until it disappeared around the curve.

“You ‘ave to move faster dan dat, man,” Santos chided to Sonny Boy.

Laughing with each other, they returned to the end of the line of people. They waited with the others for a long time for the tramcar. Some of the villagers were lucky to catch rides from a scattered number of wagons and buggies. When they realized that the tramcar was not coming, they set out on foot. Finally, a wagon overcrowded with people slowed down next to them. The driver pushed his head out the window and called out to them.

“How lon’ yu boys been walking?”

“Jus’ startin’ out.”

“Hope you not goin’ too far, cause dere is a bad accident down the road and it noh look like de tramcar gonna make it today.”

The two men stopped abruptly.

“Wha’? Wha’ happen, man?”

“De flume wash ‘way when de men dem a clean it dis morni’ in de deepest part of the river and no one can get to it.”

“How far?”

“Not far at all. Bad, bad accident.”

Santos shook his head. A sharp pain stabbed the front of his eyes and a warm dust of air came over his body. He grabbed Sonny Boy’s arm steering him in the opposite direction as the wagon slowly rolls down the road.

“Nah, Santos!” Sonny Boy pleaded, trying to turn himself back around. “ Mi naw go back.”

“You know, we ‘ave to go back,” appealed Santos. “we can’t jus’ turn ‘round and walk away now. We ‘ave to see what we can do to help.”

“Our backs turn already, Santos. Mek we ju’t keep goin, nuh?”

“Oh, so you really ‘fraid a river?” Waiting to see Sonny Boy’s reaction. “See, I know dat lon’ time!”

The men struggle back and forth turning each other in around in the opposing directions that each wanted the other to take.

“Cho, Santos!” declared Sonny boy. “ You can’t just leave good enough alone. We probably just miss the last possible ride before sun get hot.”

“ You neva know, man,” said Santos calmly. “Dem might need men fi work a few days.”

Sonny Boy stood still for the moment and reluctantly turned towards the direction that Santos was guiding him. Santos released his arm and jogged backwards, happily.

“You will see, Sonny Boy, you will see. Dere is always water in de mouth.”

The men moved forward backwards in the direction that they were coming from: one with a mission; the other halfhearted but trying to keep up with pace of hope that work and rest would soon come their way.

As they approached a curve not far down the road, they could hear a resonant whirr in the river. At first it sounded like a far away buzzing but with each second it grew louder and louder. Turning the corner, they saw a line of black men at the river’s edge. The men moved like dim shadows against the black waters with ropes tied to

rocks, then pulling them to the a spot in the river where it was in spate. Santos ran over to where the other men were standing, dropped his bag and swiftly took off his shoes.

“Wha’ happen?” he shouted to them.

“Tram car turn ova!” one of the men informed him. “Current pull it down into de turbines!”

“Watch it!” Santos warned.

The water level began to rise and one of the men jerked backwards as the current begun to pull the rock into the roaring river. Santos quickly grabbed the rope helping the man to steady himself by getting a footing on the river’s edge.

“How many people on the tram car?” Santos asked.

“About thirty people are so,” the man answered. “Some of we climb out t’rough a bull’s eye window jus’ before de current pull de tram in. De tram made a big head dive and disappear.”

“You from around here?” Santos asked.

“Not too far up de road,” the man replied.

“You know how deep dis part of the river is?” Santos inquired.

“ Ah don’ know,” whispered the man, quiverly.

Sonny Boy stood in shock at the scene. He could feel the rush of damp air and the droning water filled up his ears. He wanted to run far from there, climb up Mount Diablo and escape the loud river whines. Unblinking he watched the rising waters wondering if it continued to rise at such a quick level they may all be drawn down in the river’s currents. He shuddered at the thought and stepped back a couple feet from the edge.

“Sonny Boy!” Santos beckoned.

Sonny Boy stood still for another moment and tried to see where Santos was standing. He braced his feet into the ground fearing that the strong gush of air would blow him in. Open-mouthed, his body trembled as the wind blew and a shed of tension gripped him. Santos was standing too close to the water’s edge swaying back and forth as he and another man tugged on a rope.

“Sonny Boy!” Santos bellowed. “C’mon!”

Sonny Boy could not move. From where he stood, Santos was a spot of light against the swirling black water as smoke drifted upward. Santos gestured to the man who was holding on to the rope above him to pull the rope up. When the rope was pulled up to where the rock sat against other rock, Santos slowly pulled down portions of the rope and wrapped it around him from shoulders to feet and then each hand and nodded to the man on cliff. Gently, he slid down the rock and pushed it with his feet, sliding it off the other rocks on the banks, disappearing into the gushing waters.

Out of the depths of despair, a prayer rose from Sonny Boy’s body.

“Lawd God! Save him now!”

Santos, who knew how rivers flowed, allowed the rock?? to lower him into its fuming rage. He held tightly onto the rope and the water percolated all around him and prayed that he would not be caught into a deep dark river hole. The river gurgled like a black ocean of bubbling oil speckled with pale grey light from its fuming rage. As he descended into the walls of its dense dimness he could feel the force of the current pulling him down. The weight of the stone helped him to glide through the darkness. He began to look for the tramcar, peering to the left, then to right.

The rock landed on the side of the Tramcar, making a sonorous sound and sending a shuddering sensation through Santos' body. Despite the warmth of the water he was feeling cold and vulnerable. He swam towards what appeared to be windows and looked to see inside but the water was gurgling white smoke and he couldn't make out anything.

Breathless, he tugged on the rope and swam up to the surface.

"See anything?" one of the men holding the rope asked.

"Ah see somethin'. Not sure yet." Santos nodded and signaled to the men by the riverbank.

"Take de flashlight," one of the men offered.

Santos put the flashlight in the back pocket, legs and arms trembling. He rested for a moment, wondering if he could really go back down into river and if he would find any survivors. By now, the currents must have swept everyone down stream and further into the bottom of the river. As he stood in the droning water something traveled over his entire body; it was bone chilling cold and his body stiffened like death's hand has a hold on him.

"You find dem? Tell me you find dem!," shouted a few women who had gathered at the river banks.

Santos flinched, not knowing whether to shake or nod his head so he jerked it around, trembling and whimpering.

"Goin' back down," he shouted.

Droning water filled Santos' ears as he submerged into the river. The water was gurgling more ferociously than before as he slid down the rope hoping it would guide

him directly to the Tramcar. He could see that the water was rising and felt it lifting him up but he held tightly onto the rope pushing against the currents. Objects swam past him too quickly for him to make out what they were. He strained his eyes searching the black water for the two squares of dim yellow light that he had seen earlier but all he could see was the darkness. His body lurched against the rope and his throat tightened. Santos held his breath feeling himself suspended in the path of the swirling black water.

He searched the expanse of the water while the currents sent foam rushing to challenge his eyesight. The darkness soon thinned to a light miasma. Something light and sharp struck him. Then he saw a chair coming towards him, he swam a curve to dodge it and the chair veered, swirling overhead. Santos held on to the rope tensely but continued to propel himself downward more intensely; looking for a tinge of light. The light was the broken windows of the Tramcar, which lay on its side; where uprooted seats and other objects danced to the waves of the currents waiting to escape the swirling trapped waters. He waited a moment, looking at the small windows, wondering how he could reach inside.

A woman's wide-opened screaming eyes caught Santos' attention. She was swirling on a pole, bopping from the bottom to the top. He was not sure she was alive so he rushed into the darkness of the Tramcar, waving one hand about to feel his way to the direction where he saw her. He twisted sideways and jerked his body through when the broken panes jabbed a cut on his arm. Then he remembered the flashlight in his back pocket. The flashlight soon revealed a swarm of people swirling around in the middle of the Tramcar.

For a moment, Santos was frozen in time, he could hear the loud thump of his heart and his mind grew taut with indecision. The woman's face was growing white and screaming louder although he could not hear anything except the droning river sound. Santos stretched out his hand to her but the rush of the water floated her away from him. When the waves floated her back up again, her coiled hair brushed his hand and he grabbed it, catching a hold of her. Her hair was short so he barely got his fingers to grab a few strands of it. He cringed his fingers tighter on the few strands of hair. The woman showed some sign of life as she released her hand from the pole when Santos grabbed her. He put the flashlight in his pocket and used his hand to guide him back to the window.

“Ah caught her!,” Santos thought.

Pushing his body off the ledge of the window with a strong force he propelled towards the surface of the black water with the woman trailing. Santos' fingers fumbled but held tightly to the strands. When he surfaced, a match flared to show a boat waiting in the middle of the river. He tilted his body towards it, hoping its occupants will see him and row towards him. He sensed that he was at an incline of the rushing water and he was losing grip on the woman's hair.

“Dere he is!,” a voice shouted in the distance. A couple of men dived into the river and swam towards them.

“Tek her!,” he murmured, breathless.

“Ah got her.” Whispered one of the men in the water as the boat pulled in. With the help of the other men, the woman was placed on the boat's floor face down and one man sat to tend to her.

“You gone a long time, didn’t t’ink you was gonna mek it!” said one of the men.

“Nuff people down dey. Dem still in de Tramcar,” Santos informed the men.

“Ah going back down to see if Ah can pry de doors open.

The men looked on yearningly as Santos spoke with force of the current tugging at them. The air was arm and humid and fear flowed with the fitful gusts of the wind.

“Find de best swimmers,” Santos instructed, “and line dem around so dat dem can help when de bodies come floating up.”

“Bodies? Dem all dead?”

“Ah don’t know,” whimpered Santos. “But from de look of t’ings, dem lungs must full up a water by now.”

The men nodded and one handed Santos a small oar. Just then, the woman in the boat began to asphyxiate, coughing up the water from her lungs. Santos’ heart soared at the sound of the cough, which gave him a drop of hope for the mission ahead. After taking in a deep and long breath, he plunged into the dark water. As he immersed, he could feel the weight of the oak in his shoulders, neck and back and he pulled it against the rising river current but his mind weaved the ghostly image he had just witnessed in the Tramcar. He found the rope and glided down until her landed on the window pane.

Santos searched for the doors with the oar and flashlight, bending low. The current became stiff and the darkness thickened. He had the feeling that the Tramcar was moving, so he bent as far as he could, sweeping the oar as long as his arms could reach. He wondered if the doors were on the other side of the Tramcar that lay on the bottom of the river. He could not tell so he returned to the windowpane and slinked himself inside. His head hit something and stars danced in it.

He swam around, tracing the line of the Tramcar and found a lever by the window. He used the oar to hit and pry the lever with all his might. The oar jammed into an opening and would no longer move. Santos sensed this may be where the doors open and clutched the oar wincing through the sharp and rugged cold wood. As he tugged and trembled, he could hear the strong steady throbs of his heart. He didn't want to look around to see the pictures that had flashed through his mind, so he fixed his attention on the pain in his hand and pried the oars from side to side.

Suddenly, he heard a creaking noise and the doors opened sending a gush of water in and out of the Tramcar along with the uprooted seats and other objects. Santos grabbed the flashlight to see what remained in the darkness. He saw a purple faced young man, wearing a white shirt shaking with the current, bobbing up and down. He dropped the oar diving towards him, grabbed him and shoved his body towards the rising current. Santos followed and soon caught his hand and swam back to the water's surface.

"Lawd, Ah wonder how many of these folks dead right here," he prayed as reached the surface.

There was about a dozen people in the water swimming and tending to the stiff bodies that were now floating and gurgling in a churn of foam. He swam the young man to river banks where Sonny Boy stood, waiting and praying. Sonny Boy lent a hand to pull the young man out of the river and onto the banks.

"Put him straight 'pon his back, till you see the sign," Santos howled.

Sonny Boy stared at Santos' freckled face; at his wet clothes and the arms that hung limp yet strong. His lips moved but he could not speak. He could hear only the sound of his own heart ticking like a town's clock. By the look of fear in Sonny Boy's

eyes, Santos knew that his cousin wanted to say something but couldn't find the words to express.

“Is awright, Sonny Boy,” Santos consoled.

Then a bolt of thunder exploded through the mountain and the beat of sweeping rain streaked through the trees and on the river. The lids of Sonny Boy's eyes drooped over his pupils as he let out a sigh, falling into the arms of Santos.

DOWN BY THE RIVER

Three days later, the sister of the young man whom he had saved appeared to Santos as a nymph, he almost couldn't tell if she was human or a mermaid, but he was sure of one thing, he wanted her. Santos was sitting on a rancid rock along the Boca De Agua about half a mile from where the terrible accident had happened. Chilled by the early morning breeze he sat with arms wrapped around his legs, chin perched on his knees.

He was contemplating the coil and slither of the river when he noticed a woman ambling her way down a windy rugged path towards the river. As Santos watched her travel the downhill path, balancing a basket on her head and clearing the bushes in the way with a gentle sweep of with one hand like the brush of the wind, his heart became smitten.

The young woman did not notice Santos sitting on the rock, so he sat breathless, waiting. She was tall and slender and wore a layered green cotton skirt, a faded pink blouse with a purple scarf on her head that seemed to help balance the basket of faded clothes on her head. As he gazed, he dazed. When the woman came into the fullness of the riverbank, the light from water glowed on her face and Santos was in awe of her beauty.

Her soft brown complexion was as cool and dark as the river water and she sang a somber song.

"I'm gonna lay down my burdens
down by the riverside
Down by the riverside

down by the riverside
Oh I'm gonna lay down my burdens
down by the riverside
Ain't gonna study war no more
Well I ain't gonna study war no more
ain't gonna study war no more
Ain't gonna study war no more
I ain't gonna study war no more..."

She lifted the basket off her head with ease emptied its contents of clothes by the riverbank. He noticed her soft knees when she pulled up her skirt using it to make a seat on a nearby rock as she sorted the faded clothes and dipped them in the river. As she washed she hummed the same song. He watched her work for a long time afraid to breathe lest he disturbed her. And in that moment's breath, she felt his presence and turned to come face to face with the man who had saved her brother.

Following their first meeting, Santos and Nora met at the river every morning before the sun got too hot and the river too crowded with bathers and washerwomen. It was at the riverside that they first experienced love and watched it sprout and blossomed. Nora was a quiet young woman with the prettiest hazel eyes and Santos as an easy man to please. And so life happened and Nora got pregnant which seem natural enough, so Santos married the woman who had enchanted him on the riverbanks. But during the pregnancy she became distant, sometimes wondering off for hours and the light in her eyes began to fade. By the time, the baby was born, Nora was depressed and detached refusing to eat any real food except for the wild berries that grew by the riverside.

A year later, Santos was still in Boca De Agua where they thought of him as a hero living with Nora, and their son was one week old. But it was not paradise, the work

was hard and the baby was not well and neither was Nora for that matter. It was at the riverside that he found Nora eating wild berries while their son laid naked in a stiff fetal position, big head bobbing to the ebb and flow of the river currents.

“Guzung-foot! Nora! It’s a baby,” Santos cried. “You can’t just put him down anywhere.”

Nora did not answer or even acknowledged Santos. Santos rushed over to the baby, picked him up, cradling him while dusting sand from its head and body. He took a piece of clothing from the basket and wrapped it around the child.

“Wha’ you goin’ to do, Nora?”, Santos pleaded, part anger, part disdain.

“Wha’ we going to do? It’s been days now. You haven’t spoken a word to me or to de child. You treat him as if him is jus’ a piece of dirty clothes not worthy of washing. Look at him!”

Santos brought the baby closer to Nora, eager for her to show some compassion but she remained distant. Since Nora became pregnant, her mood and personality were on tenterhooks. Santos thought her mood would change when the child came but ever since giving birth last week, Nora had shown no interest in the child and Santos was growing more apprehensive. The child was born with signs of malformation, a perpendicular head and minuscule body and would require exclusive care in particular the sucking of its mother’s breasts.

“Look at him, Nora! Dis is our son,” Santos pleaded. “De child you carried for nine months. Ah don’t believe that you can’t even look at him. A baby needs nursing, no matter how it looks.”

The baby coughed up some water and woke up crying.

“Hush, hush little baby, hush,” Santos soothed him. “Are you hungry, my pet?”

Santos brought the baby closer to Nora and attempted to cradle him by her breast.

Nora stood stiff against its softness, staring off

“Please, Nora,” he urged. “Him too young not to nurse. Don’t turn him away. Look at dis tiny mouth, it can’t take anythin’ other dan de nipple of your breast. Just try, please.”

Nora pushed Santos and the baby aside.

“Dat is not a baby!” Nora finally exclaimed. “Dat is a demon!”

Santos shocked, shook his head as tears welled up in his eyes.

“Him only a week old. Give him a chance,” Santos urged. “Give him some time. De looks will change. You will see. Please, Nora, Ah begging you.”

Reluctantly, Nora took the baby from Santos and walked away. She straddled the child in one hand under her breasts bouncing it up and down. The baby cried louder and his tiny feet kicked up through and against the swaddled cloth. Nora seemed to be stern and distant and would not look at the baby.

“‘Ere, ‘ere! Bread and pear!,” Nora jeered, rocking the child more rhythmically.

“Come on, Nora!” Santos said. “This is not a game. Be careful with him.”

“‘ere, ‘ere! Bread and pear!” Nora continued singing the rhyme as she tossed the child in the air. “Where’s my share?”

Santos watched closely in the near distance, taken aback at the lack of emotion.

“Cradle him in your arms, Nora,” he implored. “Please.

But Nora kept on repeating what sounded like a nursery rhyme.

“Up in the air!” she chanted, tossing the child in the air and catching him without care. “How I reach it?”

Santos caught a glimpse of his son’s fearful face and hurried his plea, frozen in place but reaching for the child.

“Please, Nora,” he beseeched. “Him too young and fragile. Ah begging you to stop doin’ dat.”

Santos’s heart felt like it stopped beating when Nora laughed, tossing the baby again. Her laughter mocked his plea and the baby was up in the air again. He wailed and kicked at her bosom and Santos could feel his strong objection.

“Climb on a broken chair!” Nora chimed. “Suppose I fall? I do not care!”

Fear gripped Santos’ body as the nursery rhyme drummed in his ears. He screeched a scream that echoed way down the river stream when Nora tossed the child in the air again. The lullaby stuck in Nora’s throat when the baby’s tiny feet kicked her in the eyes. The swaddled cloth slipped through her hands and the child fell at his mother’s feet making a thumping sound in the sand.

“Oh, No, Nora!” Santos cried. “Oh, No!”

As the river flowed wide rippling over rocks and stones, Santos saw the saddened disbelief on Nora’s face but he also recognized the distant and void of emotion. He rushed to the child at his mother’s feet; picked up baby that she had dropped and cradled the child’s heart to his ear.

When he heard the faint heartbeat of his son, Santos chose to love it and decided to carry the baby to Retreat where he knew Mima and family would love him as he should be loved. So he took the child, leaving Nora and Boca De Agua.

“No use quarreling with fate,” was the last thing Santos said to his cousin, Sonny Boy.

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THE ARRIVAL

It seemed that everyone in the village woke up at the same time that Friday morning but not with the usual zealously. As the morning light ascended on the village, no one seemed to notice that the rooster had not crowed, that the owls had not tooted, that no rat bats were flapping and screeching by the caves, no dogs were barking, no insects were chirping, and no birds were singing. It was a quiet creepy morning and the only sounds to be heard were those of each household as they opened their bamboo-paned windows to greet the first ray of light; and the quiet rush of the river.

Mima was dreaming that she had fallen off a rock into the deep blue hole at the bottom of a river. She struggled to swim, kicking and swinging her arms but she could not save herself. The river currents kept pulling her down. She tried stretching her arms out laterally but her body gravitated in a spiral downward. As she sank in her dream she saw her mother swimming towards her but could not get close to save. The river currents were moving rapidly as fishes and weeds disappeared with the fast flowing currents. In the dream, Mima passed all of her loved ones and none of them could save her. The deeper she sank the more she struggled. The slow sinking feeling of being totally submerged into the darkness of the endless river sent such a shock of sudden fear through her body, awakening her in a spasm and with a stiff sharp pain slinked in her right arm and shoulders.

Mima got out of the bed slowly and cautiously and walked over to the two windows that faced the back porch of her house. When she tried to open the window, the

stiff sharp pain stabbed at her again. She fraught her arms upward but was halted by another tinge of pain that extended from her arm and neck to her rib cage.

“Mus’ have slept badly last night,” she muttered as she gently massaged her arm, shoulder and neck. “Time to turn de coir mattress.”

She looked out at the misty morning as the fog rolled like clouds on the mountains. Despite the aching pain, a smile spanned across her face as wide as the mountain range. From her house on the top of the mountain, she looked on as the village slowly came to life. She saw someone throwing out the peels from last night’s dinner at the pig’s sty; she saw someone with a towel thrown over his shoulder heading for a bathe in the river; but she did not see her cousin, Vi, who lived in the house just below hers, walking away from the window with a scowl on her face nor hear her hushed the *good morning* that was on the purse of her lips and sucked her teeth instead.

Mima’s heart raced with excitement when she remembered it was Friday and Market Day. She could not recall the exact moment that she realized she loved going to the Market but she knew that she had been going every Friday since she was five years old. The Market had a life and energy of its own and it was one of the only trips that most women left the villages besides going to worship in the Prayer House at the foot of the hill near Content. Mima loved watching the men and women of all sizes and ages push their homemade carts and stalls around, moving goods and produce from one end of the sprawl to the other. The Market scene was wonderfully frenetic on Mima’s mind as she pictured the hagglers walking around shouting the items they have for sale.

“Hegg. Get you ‘ard boiled hegg!”

“Miss yuh want a scallion? Only seventy pence ah one.”

“Soup, soup, who want a soup for breakfast?”

“Plantin, sixty pence fi one!”

“U betta watch you purse!”

She also thought about the chores ahead that she needed to prepare before getting to the market. This Friday, her sister, Lillieth, Vi and Mavis, the shopkeeper would accompany her to the Market. But first, the men would help mount the two donkey carts and load them with yams, breadfruits, bananas and mangos. Once the staple foods were in the donkey carts, the woman along with the help of her granddaughter, Olive would pack baskets of nutmeg, thyme, scotch bonnet peppers, pigeon peas, callaloo, tomatoes, and ackee; cut flowers; collect eggs from the coops; and the sweets good of various coconut treats for the six mile journey to the market and back.

After sorting out the order of the day, Mima knelt down beside the bed where her husband, Beba, slept and prepared to make her prayers.

“Dear Lawd,” she began, deliberately. “Give me de strength and courage to walk through anotha day on earth.”

Beba awoke, clearing his throat and sat up in the bed.

“Mornin’ Mima.”

“Mornin’ Beba,” she responded and kept on praying. “And give me de wisdom to know Hen I am tired. Lord, you lead and I will follow.”

Beba got off the bed and kneeling beside his wife, he too began to make his devotion in silence. As he prayed Beba thought of the spiritual and secular tasks that he would have to perform on this Friday morning. He would help Mima and other women to pack the two-donkey carts and make sure they had enough money to make change

when they sold their goods and wares. But his thoughts focused on the yam hills where the soil had become arid and loose due to the drought, which was affecting the yam crops in particular. Beba thought of how his stature as village chief seemed to have diminished over the years but his duties had multiplied since many of the men had left the village to find work that was more profitable elsewhere including his own son, Santos, and his nephew, Sonny Boy. People were no longer content with the simple and natural order of the village that Mima's forefathers had built and yearned for the cities and faster pace of that was a growing celebration of the island's new independence. Today, he would also counsel the few remaining men in the village about their obligations as husbands and fathers to the women and children and pray that the men would toil the dry loose yam hill soil, uproot some of the vines, redirect them downward towards the river and give them as much water as Olive could carry up the hill before sundown. So he too prayed for the strength and courage to work through the day back bending to soil.

When Mima finished praying, she placed her hand on her husband's shoulder, raising her body from the floor. As she lifted her body upward, the tinge of pain in her shoulders seemed to have intensified growing stiffer and sharper. She pushed down heavily on Beba with one hand while resting the other hand on the bed. Beba felt the heaviness of her weight and became concerned.

"You feelin' well today, Mima?" he asked concernedly.

"Jus' a little ache and pain here and there," she responded once she was steady on her feet.

From the kitchen where Mima was fixing breakfast, she called out that someone was coming up the mountain path just below Cousin Vi's, who looked like Santos.

“Looks like he got a bundle in his hand,” Mima added. “Mus’ be somet’ing fragile by the way he’s holdin’ it.”

This was more than enough information to stir up Olive’s curious ears and within seconds, dropped her twigs and went racing through the house with excitement and intrigue.

Beba got up quickly from his morning devotion and grabbed the tail of her skirt, as she was about to charge out of the room. Olive spun around a bit dizzy and came face to face with her grandfather.

“Youn’ lady!” he scoffed. “Your uncle will get to de house in due time.”

“Oh Beba,” she whined, pleadingly.

The severe look on her grandfather’s face told her to do as she was told.

“You runnin’ down de hill won’t make him get here any sooner,” he continued slowly as Olive dropped her head to her body.

Mima came into the dining room with a pot of hot chocolate and a couple bowls of fruits and looked in the room at Beba and Olive. Beads of sweat filled her soft brown face, after placing the things on the table, she wiped the sweat from her face with the colorful cloth around her waist.

“Beba, if de child wants to go and meet her uncle, what on earth could be wrong with dat?” she chided.

Olive looked up at her grandfathers’ gray bushy eyebrows and further into his sunken watery eyes. She pleaded silently with her own set of beady eyes for him to let her go and he soon released his grim and grip. Mima nodded her approval to Olive, whose heels set off to chase the wind down the hill.

She met Santos, as he was about to make the second bend in the path, where people would turn off to get to the other side of the village or continue straight pass Vi's house to the top. The bundle was smaller than she had anticipated and seemed even more fragile.

"Uncle Santos! Uncle Santos!" she called out as she skirted down the hill to greet her bearded face uncle, breathlessly.

"What did you bring us?" She asked as she tugged gently on his arms trying to see what was in his hand.

"Be careful dere, Miss O," he cautioned her, pulling his arms up to guard the package in his hand.

"Oh, please, Uncle Santos. Let me see! Let me see!" she begged.

"In due time, Miss O," Santos said as he pulled the bundle closer to his chest.

"Oh, Uncle Santos," she continued to whine. "Can't I jus' have a little peep?"

Santos laughed his hearty laugh and freed one of his hands to ruffle through her short hair.

"Mangoes?" Olive guessed, skipping from side to side, making it hard for her uncle to walk up the narrow footpath.

"Well, if you won't show me, can you tell me?"

Santos began to whistle a sweet tune.

"Mmmm. Guavas?" Olive continued to play with her uncle, who didn't seem like he wanted to reveal anything to her.

"Nessberries?" she persisted.

“No, Miss O,” he laughed. “And you’ve used up your three guesses so you will have to wait until we get to de house to find out.”

Seeing that she was not going to get any information out of him, she continued to skip and jump up trying to get a peek of what he was carrying in the crocus bag, causing him to stumble a bit at the intersecting path leading to Vi’s house.

Vi came out of the kitchen only to see the tail end of Olive’s dress as she had darted down the hill. Olive had not bothered to call out to her in her singsong voice as she usually does. So she stood with vexation, hands akimbo and waited for them on her verandah. Vi and Mima were first cousins, their mothers long passed, were sisters, and there was an unspoken resentment that Vi had for Mima. When Vi saw Santos with crocus bag so close to his chest, she knew exactly what was wrapped in that bag.

“Long time, Santos!” she exclaimed. “Long time no see.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Santos replied.

“Come by later. We can catch up over a shot of rum.”

“Indeed, ma’am. Indeed, and a tall glass of your delicious lemonade.”

Then she turned and gave Olive a sneer and a chuckle and walked back into her house.

“Trouble up a top,” Vi gurgled to herself.

When Santos, Olive and the crocus bag arrived on the mountaintop, Mima had already placed breakfast on the table where Beba was seated at the table. He had begun eating the meal without grace knowing that he had just made prayers. His heart grew heavy as he ate, barely tasting the food that he was putting in his mouth. Santos did not enter the house from the back porch of his parent’s bedroom, the most likely place

coming from that footpath. He walked around to the other side of the house where Olive's bedroom was near the kitchen. Mima was already in the room, making room for Santos's visit.

"Olive," she called out. "You sit down at the table and eat your breakfast. De lawd knows today is going to be a blessed busy day."

As soon as Olive sat down, joining Beba at the table to eat her breakfast, a baby's cry shrieked out of the room and echoed through the small house. Shocked and stunned, Olive looked at Beba's stoic face. She was in daze and was so taken aback that she did not attempt to move as her mind raced to her bedroom. Perhaps it was the look on her grandfather's face that pinned her down to the chair but she was feeling a bit shaken by the baby's crying. She could not believe that she had not guessed that the bundle in her uncle's arm was a baby; it had seemed too small to be child.

Myriads of questions probed through her inquisitive mind. She could not figure out which ones to ask first or whether to ask any questions at all. She could hear Mima and Santos in the room speaking in low voices, whispers and hushes for the baby. Mima started to sing in her lilted voice a sweet song that sounded something between a lullaby and a church hymn. Once the crying quieted down, Santos came out to the living dining room to join her and Beba at the table.

Santos greeted both his father and the food in the same breath, exclaiming how delicious the meal looked and smelled while piling a large serving of everything on his plate. Beba seemed far removed from what was going on as he slowly chewed his food and stared out the window. He did not utter a word to his son. As Santos ate, he attempted to make small talk with his father asking about the crops and offered his help

to plant some yams in the coming weeks. Beba just stared out the window, glancing now and then at Santos with a mumble here and there.

Seeing Beba's distance, Santos soon turned his attention to Olive with questions about what she been doing, how many birds she slew in the past month, caught any crabs lately, and which boy she was bullying around. This small talk went on for a couple of minutes until Beba burped and got up from the table. He picked up the Bible that sat on a small desk in the corner of the dining room and went into the bedroom on the other side of the house.

Mima, who was in the room quietly attending to the baby, heard Grandpa Ben's movements and instructed Olive to clear off the used dishes on the table. After taking the dishes into the kitchen, Olive went out to the side of the house where her room was to see if she could sneak a peak at the child. Mima looked up as she approached and gestured for her to come into the room, quietly. She was sitting on the bed and Olive went up closely to lean on her grandmother's warm arms and was for the first time the tiny baby that laid sleeping in the center of her bed.

Olive shivered with fear at the sight of the sleeping child. The baby did not look normal at it. It had a perpendicular shaped head much bigger than its tiny body, which was about the size of a fist. An unpleasant feeling swept through Olive's body and she put her arms around her grandmother hiding her apprehensive face into her bosom.

"Go wash up de dishes," Mima said softly.

"De dishes?" Olive asked not wanting to let go.

"Yes, de dishes you jus' cleared off de table," Grandma Mim replied.

“But, Mima, I wanna stay here wid you and de...,” Olive protested clinging harder to her grandmother.

Mima peeled Olive gently from her and pushed her towards the kitchen.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Olive replied.

Santos was already in the kitchen stacking dishes in a basin in the sink. He looked up at Olive as the kitchen door slammed behind her.

“It wasn’t me, it was the wind,” she explained, quickly.

“Just be more careful de next time,” said Uncle Santos. “You don’t want to wake up de baby. I wash and you rinse, alright?”

“Alright,” she eagerly replied, relieved for the help she was about to receive and appreciative for the time with her uncle.

“Get de other basin and put some clean water in it,” he said.

Olive did as she was told. Her uncle and her proceeded to wash and rinse dishes in silence. Each time Olive was passed a dish to rinse, she looked at her uncle with the desire to question but did not want her grandmother to overhear her. But the curiosity was too much to contain.

“Uncle Santos,” she finally whispered. “Is that your baby?”

Yes, Miss O,” he answered, good-naturedly.

“Where did you get it from?”

“I got him from a woman,” he laughed.

“Him?” she asked. “You mean, it’s a boy?”

“Uh, uh,” he murmured.

“Where is she?” she asked.

“Who?”

“De woman dat baby belong to. His mother!”, she whispered.

“Is she coming soon?”

A dark cloud swept over her uncle’s face. The expression on his face was sorrowful and Olive was feeling a mixture of unhappiness and misfortune. She became nervous and searched her thoughts for something to say that would make her uncle laugh again but she could not think of anything. She wondered about the small child that was lying on her bed, her grandfather’s silence and her uncle’s darkness. The situation with the baby was being handled strangely and somewhat secretive. What was more puzzling was how the child looked, she had never seen a bay with such a huge head and small body, it just didn’t have the right proportions for what she perceived as normal.

The morning sun rose high in the sky kissing Olive’s brown skin as she wandered into the yard. She assumed that the closed bedroom door was meant to keep the room cool for the baby and not to shut her out of her own room. As she wandered further into the yard, she began to feel a tinge of resentful for the new arrival. Just as she was about to settle with her brooding thoughts, Mima summoned her with a list of errands to run. This would usually delight Olive but today she wanted to stay at home in the yard with her thoughts. The list of errands from Mima was a long one and would take her out of the village, off the mountains, across the Wag River and through the meadows. So Olive set off to beat the hot sun with a straw hat on her head and with Mima’s last words lingering in her head.

“And don’t utter a sound to anybody about de baby! Eh?”

These words did not sit well with her. There was an air of mystery about this baby that was affecting everyone's behavior.

WHEN TROUBLE TEK YOU

Children of African and Indian descent are scattered throughout the schoolyard playing soccer, stickball and other games, talking, laughing and singing. The hot Caribbean sun shines on the children's green, gold and brown school uniforms. A small group of girls are singing a nursery rhyme, "*There's a Brown Girl in the Ring.*"

Brown girl in the ring
Tra la la la la
There's a brown girl in the ring
Tra la la la la
Brown girl in the ring

There are five girls that make up the ring game; each girl sings two stanzas.

Claire, a light complexion girl around ten years old with hazel eyes, picks up the next stanza. She is sweating slightly around her mouth, wiping the sweat on her gold blouse by her shoulders.

Olive rolls her eyes at the third girl; jumps in the middle of the ring and dances; swaying hips sultrily. Claire smiles shyly at Olive, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her blouse. Chloe, Claire's twin sister, who brown skin and hazel eyes, sucks her teeth at Claire, smiles at Olive, and jumps in the ring and dancing around.

Three boys approach the girls; Claude, a heavy-set brown skinned boy, and two slightly built boys of the same age but darker complexions; and stand menacingly behind the ring, hands on hips and twirling sticks.

"Beng-a-deng!," Claude heckles. "Beng-a-deng!"

Olive jumps out of the circle backing away from the group. She positions herself, hands on hips, feet apart, facing Claude.

“Mind your business!, “she hissed. “You fat goat!”

Claude steps between Claire and Chloe and shoves them out of his way. Olive retreats further from the group, maintaining her stance.

“Who you a call a fat goat, Olive?,” he demanded.

“I’m talking to you, bullfrog!,” Olive retorted. “And if you touch my cousin again, it’s gonna be me and you in this school yard today.”

“Yea?,” Claude taunts, holding up his stick as he stares at Olive’s tight lips. “What you gonna do, alligator face?”

“Touch them again and you’ll see,” Olive sneers back at him. “Think I’m afraid of you?”

Claire and Chloe look from Olive to Claude and fearing danger move slightly away from Claude, who grabs their hands forcefully.

“What you gonna do?,” Claude incites. “Call your grandma to bring her machete and weed up the school yard?”

The boys laugh while the girls cover their mouths in bewilderment. Claire and Chloe struggle to get free and subsequently falls to the ground. Surprisingly, Claude looks at Olive, with open mouth to speak but no sound comes out.

Olive bends down, picks up a rock a little larger than the size of her hand and hurls it straight into Claude’s forehead. His head jerks backward; he raises his hands to catch the blood that drips down his forehead. Everyone stands shocked and still except for Olive, who shifts from side to side.

“See, see,” she grumbles. “See what you made me do. I told you not to touch them.”

“See, what you made do,” she whines, her voice becoming softer and sadder, almost close to tears. “Damn you, frog face.”

Later that afternoon, Olive, Claire & Chloe are walking home from school down a country road amongst a scattered number of other children. The girls talk, play, run, and skip as they head down the winding country road. They hear the sound of a car approaching and the girls hide in the bushes until the car passes.

Each of the children, some alone and some in groups of two go off on different paths from the road, waving and calling goodbye to one another. Olive is the only one left on the road. She passes a cemetery and approaches a swing bridge leading across a river. There is an old white wooden sign at the foot of the bridge that reads, *Retreat*.

A man is seen walking stealthily behind Olive as she crosses the Bridge to the other side of river. Olive is unaware and walks up the shore of the river, splashing in her feet and throwing rocks in the water until she rests in a clear spot.

Looking around and seeing anyone, she undresses down to her underwear and goes into the river for a swim. The man lurks in the bushes watching Olive. Scouting some rocks, he makes way into the river and grabs Olive from behind. Holding her head into a lock, he threatens her with a knife under her throat.

“Not a sound out of you, pretty gal,” the man warned. “Not a sound.”

Olive struggles to get free, but his grasp is strong and holds her upper body roughly against his. The man’s hands take hold of Olive; she bites, scratches and kicks.

“Let me guh!,” she hollers. “Let me guh!”

“Gal, shut you mout’, gal” the man hisses.

She tries to wiggle her lower body but the slime on the rocks made her slip and fall further into the Man’s body and they both fall into the river stream with the knife around her throat. Olive tussles with the man, kicking her feet and jabbing with her elbows into him until he slips and loses his bearing. She swims hastily to the bank and grabs her school uniform; picking up her wet feet to run up the mountain like someone on fire.

Clothes in hand, slipping and falling as she goes, crying, hair wet, dishevel and bruise, she approaches the house when Mima hears her crying comes out wiping hands in the apron.

“Olive, what you crying about, girl?” Mima inquired.

When Mima sees her disarray, she knows something bad has happened and reaches out for Olive who is holding her clothes to a bloody chin.

“Oh, my Lord!” Mima gasps. “Olive who did dis to you?”

Olive runs by Mima into the house, slamming her room door shut.

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Men and women gather around the burning fire in Mima’s yard later that evening. The men are clutching a variety of machetes; long, short, wide and slim. They sit talking with one another gesturing movements of combat and defeat as Beba moves around the group Bible underarm, shaking hands and reasoning with the men. Olive looks out the window from her room where she has been since she running home a couple of hours

ago. She sees two of the men dressed in blue-stripped uniforms and recognizing one of them, runs out and over to the policeman, hugging him.

“Papa! Papa!” she said. “Ah know you would come.”

“Of course, Ah would come, my darlin’ daughter,” Olive’s father comforts as he picks her up kissing her on both cheeks. “Let me take a good look at you.”

Laswell puts his daughter down and they walk hand in hand towards the mango tree in the far corner of the yard and sit down. Olive is a striking resemblance of her father; slender glistening black skin with the same expression of concern on their brows.

“Ah sorry for what happen to you, Olive.,” Laswell said tenderly. “Ah see your grandmother took care of your wound. But Ah would like to see it. Police business, you know.”

“Of course, Papa. Ah understan’,” Olive responds bravely. “Mima says that the cut isn’t deep and will heal soon,”

“You’re a brave girl, Olive,” Laswell declares. “Ah goin’ to pull of de bandage and give it some air. You’ll feel a little pain but the breeze will soon ease it”

Laswell carefully removes the bandage and looks at his daughter’s face. His heart sinks deeply into his stomach, as he fears what could have happened had Olive not put up a fight.

“Ouch, Papa!,” she exclaims as he removes the bandage. “Is it goin’ to bleed now? ”

“No, sweetie,” Lawswell replies. “Mima give you a few stitches, Ah see. Ah bet by tomorrow, you won’t even need de bandage.”

Laswell replaces the bandage gently and Olive leans into her father's warm and secure arms.

"Oh, Papa, it was awful," she cries into his shirt and recounts the attack on the river earlier this afternoon.

Just then, Adassa, the twins' mother, huddles breathlessly into the yard.

"Beba! Mima! Olive! Anybody see Chloe?"

The gathering of villagers runs to her side; someone offers her a chair and she collapses into it.; someone gives her a glass of water and she drinks it. Beba tries to come her down and the villagers wait eagerly for the inevitable dilemma to come.

"Just come home from work and Chloe not in de house," Adassa explains between breaths and sighs. "Claire say she give Olive last lick past de Cemetery. So Ah come to see if she come up wid Olive...."

Adassa's voice trails off as she looks around at the gathering and realizes that something is amiss and passes out in the chair. By the time Adassa comes to it, Laswell, the other policeman and the village men are going down the mountain path with the glint of machete blades and the smog of bottle torches lighting their way.. They stop at several houses talking to the people; and In between homes, they call out Chloe's name.

Laswell walks ahead of the group, talking a forceful role in the search; with Beba second in command directing the men in various directions, some to the left; others to right; and under the two ends of the Swing Bridge. When they approach the gate of the cemetery and each man looks at the other wondering if they should cross this threshold.

Laswell sees the fear in the other man's eyes. Beba nods to Laswell and

heads fearlessly through the gates. Walking on gravestones, bottle torch held high about his head, he looks around at the grey mass around him and then back at his Beba and the other man waiting at the gate. Moving from gravestone to newly covered graves, he sees a bit of color peeking from behind a huge headstone. He stumbles across to the grave and there lays the body of Chloe, in her school uniform and books to the side.

‘Over here!’ Laswell shouts. “Over here!”

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THE BURIAL

The woman is like a shadow, the man is like an arrow.” Jamaican saying.
Woman is like your shadow; follow her, she flies; fly from her, she follows.
~Argentinean proverb

Zillah King is the most venerated woman in all of Sterling Castle probably because she stands six feet tall, portly and black against the mid-hot afternoon Caribbean sun. Machete always in tote and she walks barefoot, toes in pirouette, slit-like eyes gazing through the haze of the tall coconut trees forming a silhouette as high to the sky. She spends her time cultivating the coconut and citrus trees and a healthy banana grove that grows deep and thick into the foothill of one of the mountains. She is a mere shadow in the moonlight as she sits in front of her clay oven kitchen grating coconuts or digs graves at the cemetery for the dearly departed.

Zillah is also perhaps the most talked about woman in the village and it is for these reasons that she and her husband, Abu, live at the foothill of the mountain village away from the ogling eyes and the earshot of other people’s judgments. She is a black woman stately by nature, height and built to match the intensity of ferocity that she carries around while Abu stands just about five feet short, self-effacing, with skin tone the shade of the yellow sun. Zillah is a perfect picture of health and has not been sick a day in her life while Abu’s feebleness manifests itself day after day, year after year with flailing health and waning spirit. But their love grows deep and genuine, standing the test of time over thirty years.

They live in the valley between two emerald green mountains of Retreat and Sterling Castle where a small waterfall cascades into a cool lagoon bed of lily pads, water

lilies, white delaines and chrysanthemums. Small clusters of people stream by the house en route to work in the yam hill fields and pimento groves chattering and laughing, some with calabashes and plastic jugs to fetch water on the side of the waterfall. A few of the passersby utter faint greetings to Zillah, who often sits in front of her mortar and pestle grinding dried pimento berries for spices, but no one shows any real interest in her presence.

A group of women bathe topless, their breasts flapping against their chests as they scrub themselves with mint leaves. Zillah inhales the fresh aroma from the waterfall mists, pretending not to hear their conversations.

“A she mi a tell you about,” Ethel whispers loudly.

“Ah know. Don’t talk so loud,” Hazel whispers just as loud. “She might hear you and run we down and chop we up.”

”Ah pass by last week and saw her up de coconut tree, hacking it down,” Ethel laughs. “A man work dat.”

”Kuya! Dat man look like him goin’ to break in two,” Hazel continues. “A ole him ole.”

“She too big for dat man,” Ethel replies. “What a big Amazon woman like dat doing wid a little Chinese man?”

The women shriek with laughter, splashing the cool water on each other. Zillah leans forward listening to them speak like they are reciting poetry or playing music that she is longing to hear. She is very familiar with this kind of musing by the village women. She is even used to the scurrying of the village children when she approaches and so usually Zillah shows the same indifference to people as they pay to the grass that

that they walk on. The King name is proverbial in these parts not just because of the cultural misfits that Zillah and Abu are but their two sons, Samuel and Laswell, made quite a name for them as the brawling brothers, whose brawls over matters of very little significance keep the King's name always in disdain on the people's tongue.

The brothers are spitting images of their parents respectively, and often in rivalry and contention. Samuel, the oldest, who looks like a young Abu, light-skinned, slanted eyes and slender, lives with his wife and six children at the northern end of the meadow where fresh water flows from under a rock into a spring. He is perceived as the wealthiest in the village since he is the first to produce twins, Claire and Chloe. His brother, Laswell, who is the striking resemblance of his mother, tall, black, lives at the southern end of the meadow alone since his wife died in childbirth. The surviving girl child, Olive, lives with his late wife's parents in the house on the top of the mountain.

Crying is not something that Zillah usually does, but the women's words hit a chord deep down piercing wounds in her heart. Her anguished heart sinks and she feels powerless to the sadness that inhabits her body, mind and soul, so she climbs a rotting coconut tree to evade the emotion. The coconut tree growing alongside her garden of scotch bonnet and sweet peppers is rotten at the base and in that moment of despair, she decides to chop it down. Since most of the weight is in the crown of the tree and there are coconuts growing on it, Zillah ties a jute around her ankles and scales up the tree. From underneath the crown, she chops at the palm fronds and the coconuts go bouncing with almighty thumps. She clears the tree's crown and descends to the ground, picking up the fallen coconuts and placing them around the tree's trunk.

But the sight of Zillah's frock on the clothesline evokes a stream of tears to flow down into the beads of sweat already on her face. Her heart remains heavy and the work she is doing seems insignificant and tedious. Machete in hand on one hip, she wipes the sweat off her brows and gazes straight into the sun. The strong light blinds her eyes but she continues to stare into it. Gripping the machete with a tighter fist, she raises it towards the sun.

"Sun!" she says. "You on fire today. Ease up and let some breeze pass through. Cool down yourself!"

Abu, old and toothless, hobbles into the yard from the one-room wooden framed house and a flock of hens and roosters flutter and scatter in the yard. He is a frail man, with Chinese features, pale and wavering, hair wiry and unkempt. He stands bent over, catching his breath then slowly walks over to the large kitchen that harbors large pots, pans and bottles of coconut oil. On one side of the kitchen, there is a large barrel of water with a calabash floating on top. He scoops up some water from the barrel and takes a long drink.

"Abu," Zillah calls out to him, hearing the heaving breath. "Is dat you? How you?"

"Ah'm dyin' of thirst," the old man replies, taking another long gulp of water.

"Let me husk a coconut for you to drink," she replies. Picking up a coconut from the pile and placing it firmly in her left hand, she whacks it with the blade and in one strike the husk fly off revealing the nut and flesh.

"Dis much better for you than de barrel water," she assures him, gently.

“Sun hot today,” he declares, hands shaking as he reaches to take the coconut from his wife, who looks on tenderly at him.

“Blasted hot!” head tilting, voice lilting, she responds directly at the sun. “You nap well?”

Abu mouths the coconut and some of the drink leaks down his chin and chest and onto the pale blue shirt he wears. He wipes his mouth and chin with the back of his trembling hand. Zillah unties the green wrap from her head, wiping Abu’s chest and stomach of the coconut drink. Abu totters towards the two wooden chairs planted in front of the kitchen and sits in the one with a mortar and pestle. He tries to sit but does not have the balance to maneuver sitting and holding a coconut with shaking hands. Zillah follows and grabs the coconut out of his hand and fixes a firm grip on his arm to prevent a fall. The bathing women at the waterfall cease the prattling and laughing, watching in silence as Zillah cares for her sickly husband.

“Easy, Abu, easy,” she coaxed. “You feelin’ young today?”

The grip helps Abu to balance and bend his knees slowly in the chair. He retrieves the coconut from his wife, resting it against the mortar and pestle and waves her off. For most of the afternoon, Abu sits sipping the coconut water and watching Zillah work. Zillah set about the business of her day climbing back up the coconut tree with a pickaxe and chopping from the severed crown and body of the tree right down to its stump. She picks several branches from a pimento tree putting them on rusty zinc in the sun to dry. As the day falls gently towards dusk, Zillah helps Abu back into the one room wooden framed house, where there is a small cot covered with a whitish sheet.

Later that evening, Zillah sits with Olive, her favorite grandchild, who brings her fresh fruits and vegetables from the mountain. Hens and roosters cluck in their coops, frog and toads croak on the lily pads, the waterfalls crescendo over a transistor radio playing in the distance.

“Lovin’ isn’t easy all de time, sweet, but not easy,” Zillah muses as a cool breeze blows through the pimento trees causing her to shiver.

Olive is pretending to pestle the pimento peppers in the mortar while her grandmother grates coconut. Abu is in bed, grunting a series of snores that ends in a whistle.

“Nana, tell me ‘bout Boca de Agua,’ she asks staring into the moonlight. “Tell me ‘bout how you and Bumpa Abu met?”

“How many times Ah have to tell dat story?” Zillah chides. “You should know dat one by heart.”

“I do, Nana, but can you tell me again just to make sure I know it,” Olive pleads.

“A’right den,” she consents and sets down the grater in the large basin. “Ah was sent by my family to work for Abu’s father, your grandfather. Ah was at the ripe age of sixteen and Ah thought dat de work was going to be housework or washing clothes. But when Ah arrived at de plantation in Boca de Agua, and Abu’s father took one look at me, he send me straight in de fields with de men workers to cut sugar cane.”

“Is dat where you learned to use de machete so skillfully?,” Olive asks.-

“De blade was given to me from Ah was just a wee child, before Ah got a name,” Zillah complies. “But dat is another story, so make up your mind which story you want to hear.”

“A’right, Nana. De one about you and Bumpa.”

“Abu was de overseer and from de moment Ah walk into de fields, Ah could feel his eyes on me,” Zillah laughs. “Abu say he couldn’t stop looking at me because I was blacker dan de sun and taller dan the sugar cane fields. And no sooner we fell in love.”

“Did you dream of him at nights, Nana?” Olive asks romantically.

“Abu used to tell me that I rebuilt his heart when he first saw,” Zillah continues.” He was much older dan me and I didn’t know anything about love but de word sounded pretty and there was somet’ing in his eyes when he looked at me. But Abu was soon to be married and I a field girl knew nothing of the intended nuptials.”

“De love of a woman is all Ah want, Abu told me,” Zillah continues. “And Ah want you, Zillah. Abu was thirty at de time and his love for me brought shame and disgrace on his family for dey had selected a nice girl from another plantation for Abu. So dey forbid any union between him and me. But at nighttime, we would sneak out into the cane fields and watch shooting stars and roll over in the stingy grass. It felt natural for us since we worked there during de day and now without de heat of the sun, de grass didn’t itch as much.”

Olive scratches her long arms as she is bitten by the itch of the grass that her grandmother just described.

“One night Abu’s father caught us rolling around in de grass and he was more vexed than mad. He sent me away from de plantation, told me never to set foot back on his property. He locked Abu in a room where Abu stayed and brooded over me for two months. Dat man scared me to death but my love for Abu was strong so I stayed out of sight by day and found work at the nearby cemetery saving every penny Ah earn.”

Olive shivers in the moonlight as a gently breeze blows the waterfall mist in her direction.

“Late one night, Ah sneak into their big house and break down de door of de room where Abu was sleeping and persuade him to come away wid me. Dat our love was stronger dan a piece of land,” Zillah continued. “Abu was always a frail man and wid all de love he had for me, it was his father’s approval dat he wanted de most. But Abu agree to come with me. A man must leave his father and cling to him woman, he told me.”

Zillah pauses and unties the wrap on her head. Sweat beads cover her face and she dabs her face with the cloth.

“Dat is one night Ah will never forget for as long as Ah live. Just when we thought we were free, Abu’s father’s came upon us wid a shotgun and commanded Abu back to de house, all de while threatening to kill me. Ah don’t really remember everyt’ing after dat except dat Abu walked over to Mas Lawr and tried to get de gun. Dey struggled and struggled, and Bam! De gun go off and Mas Lawr drop dead at Abu’s feet and so we run and run, straight to the pastor’s house.”

Abu is in the room dreaming between snores and whistles as Zillah tells Olive their story.

“A man must stand for something,” Abu hears the sound of his own voice reciting in his dream. “Or fall for everything.”

He is trembling, his body is covered with sweat, he cannot hear or feel his own breath and goes silent.

It was Olive who let out an alarming cry when she finds Abu's limp cold feet sticking from under the blanket. Zillah runs into the room and shakes his thin frame with all her might but Abu does not respond. She tries to force a deep green slushy liquid down his throat. She tries to find his pulse, but he has none, she lowers her face to his nose and feels no breath. Abu is dead.

"Run, Olive, run!," she urged "Get your father!

Olive races out of the house and heads towards the southern part of the meadow.

"Tell him Abu is dead in my bed!" Zillah calls after.

There was a calm in the air that Zillah was not expecting, so she howls like a hyena trying to wake up the dead into the darkest part of the night between intervals of examining her husband's body for any sign of life and when finding none reverts back to howling. She does not go to asleep and wonders if she had given Abu a stronger cup of tea before bed he may still be alive. She blames herself for not taking better care of Abu as she lies close to his stiff cold limbs.

Zillah cradles the corpse of Abu in her bosom and rocks him long into the night. The moon slips away when all the heat of life goes out of Abu's body. From under the cot where there is a porcelain chamber pot, a washbasin and baskets filled with clothes, Zillah fetches a fallow washbasin fills it with warm water and bathes the corpse.. Then she massages his body with coconut oil soaked in pimento berries. She pulls out one of the baskets and clips three small pieces from a blue cloth and ties his hands and feet together, then his hands to his body. She wraps him in the old pink blanket, gets a long crocus bag and shimmers the corpse into it the sack.

“Ah don’t want to sleep with no dead man in mi bed tonight,” Zillah proclaims, as she picks up and rest the corpse sack on her shoulders, its head hanging to her sagging breasts, feet limp on her back. She walks the three and a half miles distance to the cemetery; Abu on one shoulder, hoe and machete on the other; without ears or eyes for anyone and anything in the way. She does not see the scampering children in whatever groups they were in or hear the gossiping woman. She does not smell the rum drinking men and the urine from Mavis’ Rum Shop as she passes through the village square. She does not hear the apathy of few passersby or the snickering of the women bathing at the waterfall. She does not see the smoke seeping out the door of the shop lights into the dark alley. Nor does she see the fear in people’s eyes when they get a glint of the blade in her hand and the dead load on her back.

Zillah sees only the stars that lights her way to the burial ground. When she reaches the provincial cemetery, she sets the sack down under a sycamore tree. She marks out a spot in the ground and clears the area with her machete and digs a grave with her hoe. As she works, she sings.

In the sweet bye and bye,
In the sweet bye and bye,
I'll have a mansion so bright and so fair;
Won't it be glorious when I get there,
In the sweet bye and bye,
In the sweet bye and bye.
When the battle is done,
And the victory is won,
In the sweet bye and bye.

Zillah is not a religious woman. As a matter of fact, she has not set foot in any of the churches because she does not own a pair of women’s shoes. She often stands outside waiting for a dearly departed or leaning against a tree listening to the music of the

breezes accompanied by the Churches' organs. This song seems to be popular among the churches when someone dies, so she sings sweetly and digs deeply a grave for Abu. When the grave is dug, Zillah rocks Abu in her bosom into the early morning touching his forehead gently as she rubs him with bay rum she had tied around her waist taking time to massage his joints. She takes off her red cotton dress and wraps it around Abu's body.

"Dis is to keep you warm and to remember me," she whispers in his ears. She rolls the body over, draping the blanket around and rolls him into the grave.

"Sun soon come up, Abu," she assures the corpse. "You not goin' to be cold for too long. Dis evening, when de earth is warm, Ah will cover you up."

Zillah ties the crocus bag around her slip and walks towards her one room wooden framed house between the two emerald mountains. She hurries pass Mavis' Rum Shop when she hears the sound of a bottle breaking but the square is vacant and no one is around.

"Don't want to see no duppy in the early morning light," she says and she quickens her pace on the paved road.

When Zillah arrives home Olive and her father are standing in the yard frantic and frazzled.

"Mama, where is Papa Abu?" Laswell asked hoarsely.

"Abu dead." Zillah responds, calmly.

"But what have you done wid him Mama? Where him body?"

"Bury him. Ah bury him. Him wid him father now."

Zillah saunters past Olive and her father into the house and lies down on the cot humming faintly another hymn.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suffering and shame
How I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down
I will cling to the old rugged cross
And exchange it some day for a crown.

IJO

There was a breathless air of intensity in Retreat, as if everyone was holding his or her breath. It was over two months since the child's arrival and Chloe's body was found in the cemetery. Fear was its face. The women seemed to hold their children closer and the men spoke gently while keeping a close eye on their own. But all eyes were on the new arrival.

The villagers caught glimpses and glances of his languid eyes; forlorn face; skull stretching cylindrical; huddled under Mima's bosom in an attempt to protect him from the gossiping eyes. The thin body looked malnourished and his forehead stuck out like a square box. The child's complexion had the strong resemblance of lignum vitae wood and his facial features were keenly etched on his delicate face.

The women no longer gathered at evening time to gossip and lull their men in the moonlight waters. Wherever two or more woman gathered their talk would always come around to the child. They sat with their hands on their heads, the waiting for death or worry stance. It seemed as if everyone was waiting for him to die.

No one had named the child, not Santos, not Mima, not Beba, not even Olive. Mostly people speculated about the kinds of serious ailments that the child was plagued with. The elders of the villagers proclaimed the child looked like an ancient river spirit whose name they couldn't quite remember. But the sound that pursed from their lips whenever they would refer to the child was Ijo.

"The child, Ijo, looks like a dish rag,"

“Ah hear, Ijo mother mek river wash him ‘way!”

“Ijo nearly drown!”

“Ah drop she drop Ijo.”

“Shame! Shame! Shame!”

“Night run til day catch him!”

The first time Olive’s ears had gotten wind of it, she was furious. But as the name rushed through mountain and river stream, it caught on like a folk song.

Ijo drowneded
Ijo drowneded,
Everybody bawl out
Ijo drowneded.
Ijo no drowneded
Ijo under bosom
Every body bawl out
Ijo drowneded

For a while Olive did not attend school, she stayed at home with Mima tending the child in between her frolics in the river and climbing trees. Ijo had taken up residence in Olive’ room. Mima had fixed up a cot on the other side of her room close to the kitchen, where she could hear if he was breathing.

Every morning Mima warmed up water on the stove for Ijo’s bath; wrapping a warm cloth around his body and bathing him in a tin tub on the porch. She would lather her hands with soap and rubbed the outlines of his body pulling gently on his arms and feet. After the bath, she would turn the baby upside down for a few seconds; then s he would prepare a small amount of cinnamon, five lemon grass, ague weed and sage and put it in a pouch around Ijo’s neck and then placed him under the shade of a tree to dry

out the water in his head. At nights, she lit a white candle and rocked him in her bosom until he fell asleep.

Santos sat in the kitchen tracing knots and swirls of the tabletop as he listened to Mima listing errands for Olive to fulfill. The pots and pans that hung motionless and the light on the clay oven that stood prominently on the black wall looked ancient and dreary to him. Sweat poured down his face and suddenly, the morning had changed into day. The sun stood still in the middle of the sky; glaring through treetops scorching the earth with its yellow heat.

Mima picked up Ijo from the bed, and joined Santos in the kitchen. She placed the child in his father's arms, fetched a large pot from its wall hanging and walked over to the kitchen stove.

"You come back for good, son." Mima asked. "Come back for good, Mima?," replied Santos standing up and raised the child up to the ceiling. "Does this look good?"

Mima looked at Santos, rock-faced. Her habitual meekness seemed to have slipped from her shoulders like a blown scarf. The silence in the kitchen was deafening and even the baby stopped breathing.

"Tell me son. What troubles your heart?," Mima asked

"Hard times, Mima. Hard times," Santos replied, releasing the tears that he had held onto to for what seemed an eternity.

On her way through the meadows, Olive saw a herd of cows grazing in the grass. She watched the grazing cattle and recognized this particular herd as the stock that which the villagers would pick from for this week's slaughter. She picked up a few pebbles and threw them towards the herd, warning them of their fate. Most of the herd moved away from where the pebbles had landed except for a brown bull, which barely lifted its head. Olive continued to throw pebbles towards the bull until the bull looked up, flashed its tail and charged towards her.

Olive quickly grabbed the small bundles of leaves and ran further in the meadows towards a stoned wall. She ran as fast as her feet would take her but as she glanced behind, she realized that that the bull was quickly gaining distance and propelled herself faster forward. In a short distance, she saw some grapefruit trees and moved towards them. She climbed up one of the trees despite the thorns it bore, grunting with the pain of the stabs and scrapes she encountered. When the bull reached the tree where Olive had perched herself, it tried to climb it, bucked its horn and head into the trunk of the tree, shaking it.

Olive climbed as far up the grapefruit tree as she could get. The bull seemed pretty intent and furious making several attacking attempts to get beyond the tree trunk. Olive was trembling as she steadied herself on narrow limbs at the top of the tree, standing on one and holding onto the other. Breathless and sweating, she looked down at the animal below trying to shake her off the tree. Olive climbed over to another branch, which was bearing grapefruits and became to pick them one after the other, throwing them at the bull under the tree. The bull urinated on its tail, flashing the wet tail of urine

towards Olive. The urine was warm as it hit Olive's feet, which she bent down to wipe off amplifying her disgust.

She perched on another branch on the grapefruit tree, picked some more grapefruits and this time threw the grapefruits away from the tree further out into the pasture hoping to trick the bull to run in that direction. This didn't seem to deter the bull as it continued to flash its tail towards Olive, moving out of the way of the grapefruits she threw. The bull would look in the direction of the sound with its ears crooked but did not move its preying position. It seemed like hours had elapsed with her in the tree throwing grapefruits at the bull and away from the bull. Not too long she saw her uncle in the distant pasture with the two-donkey cart.

"Uncle Santos!" she called out. "Uncle Santos!"

The man stopped in his path, recognizing that someone had called out his name but did not see anyone in clear sight. He caught sight of the bull hanging under the tree and feared something was wrong. He took a few small steps closer to see what was going on.

"Over here, Uncle Santos!" she called out again. "Up in the tree!"

"Olive?" Uncle Santos replied. "Is that you up in the tree?"

"Yes, Uncle Santos! It's me, Olive," she replied. "Can you chase de bull from under de tree? Mi can't get down and I not finish running Mima's errands."

"Well, how did you get dat tree?" asked Uncle Santos. "And what did you do to dat bull? It look mighty mad."

“Uncle Santos, please help me,” she cried. “The bull must know it’s time near. It just started to chase me at first sight.”

Her uncle stood for a bit longer to assess the situation and found a nearby pile of rocks and began tossing them towards the bull. The rocks landed pretty closely to the bull, grabbing its attention. As the rocks came closer and faster, the bull realized that there was additional danger, moved away from the tree and ran in the opposite direction. Olive climbed quickly down the tree, and called out a thank you to her uncle as she ran through the middle of the pasture.

Olive had only run a short distance when she turned around to see that the bull was on her trail, again. She picked up her feet higher and pushed herself forward faster. A few yards ahead was the stoned wall guarded with barbwire and Olive ran as fast as she could towards it. The bull was closer on her trail and Olive’s feet were barely touching the ground as she ran for her life. At last, she reached the stoned wall, she threw the leaves on top of the rocks, folded her skirt around her small body and crawled through an opening between the barbwire. The bull reached the stoned wall just as Olive pulled her left leg through. The barbwire gashed a long and throbbing snakelike cut straight down her leg. She gasped at the sight of blood streaming down her leg. The burning wound pierced through her body like the flame of fire and she would cringe through the pain as she walked on home.

It was Beba who greeted Olive when she got back to the house. He was pacing the porch in his traditional bush jacket shirt, the one he always wore as village chief. Olive, who kept her ears and eyes close to the ground wondered what occasion she had missed that Beba might be presiding over. Breathlessly she approached the porch and for

the first time, she noticed the strong similarity between Beba's and Ijo's eyes, languid and moist. Tears streamed down Beba's eyes flowing in and out of wrinkles she had not seen before.

“Beba! What's wrong?” she asked urgently.

Beba shook his head a thousand times trying to find the words, which when he found were only two.

“Mima gone.”

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THE CLOTH OF CONTENTION

It is Market Day and there are people everywhere, flowing in from the dusty road like different streams flow into rivers. People travel from neighboring villages to Eyodora, barefoot and shoe, to purchase and trade kilograms of grain, fabrics, fibers, livestock and other goods. Aged faces, spirited children, haggling women wearing colorful headdresses, laughing men and confused livestock darting in all directions, frame the market scene. Every Friday, the charming village of Eyodora in the northern region of the Kingdom of Nri comes alive with the bleating of animals, the battering of hagglers and the music of the tom-tom drums.

A woman draped in goatskin watches as a giant eagle passes over the open market vendor stalls. The market scene is frenetic with blaring music, loud hagglers and the smells of spices, herbs and medicines. Her stall is small and tight and there are a few customers looking at the colorful fabrics and fibers that adorn Abeba's stall.

"Fly, Eagle, Fly!" one customer remarks, looking up with hand on forehead to shade her eyes from the glaring sun.

"It's a big bird with a small sound!" the Abeba responds, tracking the path of the bird. "Brings us peace."

Abeba is one of nine women in the village who have not borne any children. She and eight other women live with their husbands at the edge of the village alongside the jagged mountain peaks in a clutch of simple wattle and daub houses. Abeba works diligently spinning cotton and plowing the land but childlessness is a providence that she could not accept. In Eyodora, children are considered valuable assets and sustainable

sources of income and voluntary childlessness is not a choice that any of the residents ever consider. Every day for the past eighteen years, Abeba prays to Ala, the fertility goddess, and during different phases of the moon she makes secret sacrifices and offerings to Ala's shrine that sits behind the great marketplace.

“Grant my body to conceive, your grace and goodness to receive,” are prayers often whispered in the moonlight and hushed under her breath during the glaring of the sun. “Place it gently in my womb, and from it let life bloom.”

It is the year of the Ikeji celebration in honor of the Ala, the fertility goddess. where villagers ask for favors, fertility, health and good fortune. The village of Eyodora goes into full swing during the celebration, which lasts for nine days. The nine women are extremely joyous as this occasion only happens ever so often, every nine years and nine years is a long time to wait to have the prospect of birthing a child. But none is more hopeful than Abeba, who continues to make daily offerings to Ala.

“This is my time!” she exclaims to the others. “ I have no more years to wait. It has to be my time!”

Abeba and the other women begin the first day of celebration with their own cleansing rituals in warm salted baths with petals of flowers and scented oils. Candles are lit and the art and act of lovemaking permeate the Eyodora village; kisses and licks behind the ears, on bended knees, and wherever sensuality flows. On the second night of the celebration, Abeba and her husband shave each other's sensual parts, gently. The stroke of fingers arouses their sexual desires.

On the third day, the women gather at Abeba's home to make figurines to represent the child that they wish to birth. Some make boy figures, while others make girls. When the figurines are completed, the women take them home and place them under their beds before they return to their lovemaking that night. And as the week pass, the women and men celebrate with many of the same rituals and a few new ones. Abeba and the other women beautify themselves with flamboyant cloths, jewelry and other ornaments. They speak feverishly of names that their babies will bear, what the names symbolize, their children's future personalities and characters, and of the aspirations and emotions of any expectant mother.

"I will have my daughter," Yeshe, Abeba's younger cousin says. "She will be more beautiful than all the other girls."

"I only want boys," another woman much younger than Abeba replies. "Surely, they are easier to care for."

"I want twins, one of each," a third woman shouts. "A set of children, if you please."

As the sun begins to set on the eighth day, a colorful procession of girls wearing embroidered robes gather around an akooko tree that stands in the center of the village dancing to the sweet sounds of the dun-dun drums. Abeba, Yeshe and the other barren women carry bunches of lovely grasses and flowers in their hands, praising Ala with their hearts and souls. As the villagers look on, a pageant of prominent elders emerges carrying cultural sticks and takes their places in front of the pyramid-formed altars of

yams placed in front of the akookoo tree. Everyone is anticipating the presence of the goddess, to see who will transport the spirit of Ala and whom she will possess.

As the moon crescents over the village, a young woman arises from the dancing procession of girls. She stands regal, her bare beautiful and supple breasts protruding from her voluptuous body that is the envy of all of the women's eyes and the growing desires of the men's groins. She looks at the nine women in front of the shrine with their jars of wine and bouquets of wild flowers, without empathy. She raises her hands and the crowd of worshippers gasps in anticipation of the subsequent words to come.

"Bring me nine crowing cocks," she declares. "And you husbands, each of you bring a strong whip!"

The drum and dance stop abruptly as these words escape from Ala's mouth. Whips are rarely used in Eyodora and only when compulsory to domesticate the stubborn animals. Without knowing what the Goddess intends, a rush of fervor spread across the gathering.

"Whips!" the nine women echo.

"Whips!" the other women wanting more children exclaim.

"What about the cattle for the whips?" another group of women solicits.

"The women that come before me today are old and dry, long past their fertility years," the Goddess declares. "This is not an easy task for a song and dance. Not all are bound to be pure and promise to be grateful."

A choir of pleas and promises resonates the Goddess' ears.

"Silence!" she softly speaks. "I am not the Goddess to deceive. I know all that goes on here on my earth. Women have been unfaithful to husbands, and husbands have

been unfaithful to wives. This wrong-doing you bring on yourselves and the entire village.”

The men and women look around at each other accusatorily. They mutter remarks to one another and a lack of trust ushers throughout the township. In the face of humiliation, some of the villagers reveal their distrust, suspicion and jealousy to the Goddess and to all who can hear. One man sends an empty calabash flying in the line of attack, and breaking in pieces on another man’s head.

“My curse, be on you!”

Ala observes the frantic chatter, listening to the rattling and rambling of the innocent, the guilty, the ignorant and the fools.

“Hear me! Hear me!”

The grumbling crowd comes to a sudden and fearful quiet.

“In order to inspire humility and gratitude back into your hearts and lives, and let nature take its course, only one of you will be granted any favor. Only nine women will dance the Sambai. The rest of you already have children who will bring forth children. The woman who endures tonight’s ritual is the purest among you and will receive earth’s womb. I will give her the power to carry on the work when I am not here!”

Another chorus of naysayers echo their protests but Ala remains unmoved.

The ritual begins with the nine women in a circle, singing. Abeba and Yeshe face each other, Abeba smiles and Yeshe returns a smirk.

“May Ala bless you,” says Abeba with a slight bow of her head.

“May the best woman win!” Yeshi replies and begins to dance with bended knees feverishly to rhythms of the Bata and tom-tom drums.

The drumming heightens and she widens her stance and tilting her pelvis from side to side. She mimics a basket in her hand and gestures the act of planting. The other women join in and Yeshi turns to the right, plants her feet on the ground one in front of the other jerking her pelvis simultaneously with her arms as if she is sowing seeds from the basket. The other women join the new movements and Yeshi takes charge of the dance and the drums hasten to keep up with her rhythm.

Abeba follows the steps of the dance precisely but not with the same fervor as Yeshi and the other women. She looks for her husband in the crowd, who returns a reassuring smile. As the other women dance, their husbands fervently look on. The other villagers gape as masqueraders dance around the women and into the crowds. The dance comes to a riveting end and the crowd stands applauding. Yeshi is revered as the accomplished dancer and takes an arrogant bow.

When the cocks crow, the dancers give the cocks to the cooks to stew. The heads of the cocks are butchered; blood is drained onto a white cloth in front of the Shrine where the revered Ala is dimly seen in the shadows of the crescent moon.

“Men! Bring your whips!”

The crowd lulls, the drumming cease and a whirr wane.

The nine men arise with the whips in their hands and face the Goddess.

“Each of your wives will receive nine lashes of your whips! Five lashes on the right and four lashes on the left! Who ever endures will become the rightful owner of the Grant-I-May-Live Cloth to bring forth children and fertility to Eyodora!”

The men hesitantly turn from the Goddess and approach their wives. The lashes of the whips reverberate throughout the marketplace as they fall on the backs of the nine women. Four of the women cringe with pain at the end of two lashes of the whips on both sides and fall to the ground. Three other women wince with the sting of the whip after three lashes on both sides falling to the ground.

Yeshe cries out, “No more, no more,” and her husband holds back the whip.

Abeba takes each lash of the whip that is inflicted on her back by her husband. As he whips, she prays.

“Grant my body to conceive, your grace and goodness to receive.”

When the last lash is imposed, Abeba stretched her arm open, walks to the Shrine and falls at the feet of the Ala. The people of the village are amazed, this is a new spectacle that very few if any want to participate in. They are content that it will be another nine years that anyone would have to endure any such fate again. Abeba sits at foot of the Shrine and eats stewed cocks as the Goddess’ helpers bathe the lashes on her back, covering the bruises with snails and spiders that salve and sew up her open wounds.

“Abeba, you are bestowed as the keeper of the “Grant-I-May-Live” Cloth. Yours is the power of fertility to sustain the earth.”

The cloth is pure crimson and Ala places it on Abeba’s head.

The crowd disperses; some with heads down, others in defiance, some accusatory, some in quarrel, and some in tears. A sense of mistrust pervades the air; another day to wait on fate. Doors slam deafeningly and hinges jiggle loosely. Marriage beds become battlefields.

Abeba and her husband remain at Ala's shrine, quietly praying with no particular request. They rise and walk home, arms tightly tucked around one another, hips bumping to the quick stride beneath their feet. They close their doors inaudibly, slipping under the comforts and caresses of their bed sheets.

Abeba is wandering in the vast meadows where the cattle graze and farmers thresh grain as they have for thousands of years. In the distance, a group of men and women are bathing and washing clothes in river while children herd sheep and goats between frolics of play in fields of corn. She feels a warm gush like a gallon of water running down the insides of her legs and a contraction of pain that sends a shock throughout her entire body. She tries calling out to someone, to anyone, to let them know that she is ready to have her child but no words come, only grunts and groans. She manages to grab hold of a tree, breathing heavily and rhythmically.

“Alas, Ala!” she moans. “My time has come, my time has come!”

Abeba stoops down pulling her long skirt over her knees as she massages her stomach. She looks around hoping to catch someone's eyes. She takes off the red cloth on her head and waves it about in the air but no one sees her. She tries again to call out but her words only whisper in her own ears.

She takes the red cloth and places it on the ground with the intention of sitting by the tree to rest for a while. A thrust of pain sends her in a squatting position and more water seeps down her legs. She starts to push on her right side, wrapping her arm around her left leg and holding it close to her chest. With another thrust of pain, she switches to the left side. With each contraction, her body is forced down closer to the earth, one arm

around one leg while waving the other arm in the air. Another push brings her down to her knees, face to the earth in kneel and squat position. She contracts in and out, body rising and falling, swaying backwards and forwards and from side to side.

“I am ready to have my child,” she says softly and as she smiles through the pain.

Abeba manages to bring her body to rest on the tree and the ground. She places the red cloth between her legs as waves of contractions take over every cell of her body. She feels her whole body pushing and her skin starts to burn. She looks towards the river and sees Yeshi bathing in the cool dark waters. She raises her hand and waves at Yeshi, who does not see Abeba.

“Yeshi, my cousin,” Abeba mutters. “It’s my time!”

Abeba’s body continues to push and with each push, she feels the baby getting lower and lower. She feels her vagina stretching and kindling the same sexual desires she has with her husband during lovemaking. Her eyes roam around the village in search of him but he is not in sight. The waves are more intense and she tries to relax and let her body do the pushing. She is covered in sweat and the cloth underneath her turns to placenta purple and menstrual brown.

Everything is happening so quickly and her body seems to be doing all the pushing so Abeba just tries to remember to breath. Three more pushes and the baby’s head juts out. As the head comes out., Abeba feels his ears rubbing on her cervix. Her body gives a couple more pushes and the rest of the baby comes out. Abeba could see that it has one eye open ready to take a peek at the world. She reaches down and grabs it. She notices that it’s a boy. He is warm and squirmy and wet. She places him on her chest. The child does not cry as he is still attached.

When Abeba tries to pull out the rest of the after birth, the child sneezes. As she pulls, her body is shocked by another wave of contractions and the umbilical cord seems to extend itself. A couple of pushes and she sees another head protruding with the same sensation of ears on her cervix. Abeba births three boys in this fashion. She uses the cloth to clean them, tearing off tinges of fiber from the ends of the cloth to tie the umbilical cord.

“Behold, the fruits of my womb!”

She wraps the cloth around her still shivering body and the three children on her chest and falls into a joyous sleep.

Abeba is known as the woman of the cloth, a gift that the spirit of Ala, the goddess of fertility, endowed to her with the Grant-I-May-Live Cloth. With the possession of the cloth, Abeba is the spiritual connection between the deities of heaven and earth and acquires special skills of fertility. She is a skilled cloth-maker but the most distinguishing garment is her elaborate headdress, the red crimson that she almost always wears. People come from far and wide to purchase acquire her magnificent one of the kind kente, mud and tie-dyed cloths, textile and colorful fibers that she makes from animal skins and furs, grasses and leaves, bone and shells. Abeba also makes cloths in opulent shades of crimson for women who desire to have children and cannot conceive. These cloths aid women to conceive and Abeba facilitates giving birth .

All of the other barren women of Eyodora now have their own children except for Yeshe, who is growing old and bitter by the day. Abeba visits Yeshe frequently and with each visit she brings a new cloth that she believes encapsulate Yeshe’s spiritual energy to

grant Yeshi with the favor of a child. Habitually, they make prayers to the Goddess at her shrine during different phases of the moon. On one visit, Abeba finds Yeshi severely weeping.

“What ails you so deeply, my cousin?” Abeba asks.

“If the Ala grants me favor to conceive a child, would I be able to endure another lash of a whip?”

“Be of good faith, Yeshi,” Abeba assures. “I have another cloth that I have loomed. Your life is not yet doomed.”

“The cloths you loom brings nothing but doom,” Yeshi replies. “Give me the one you wear! This is the cloth in Ala’s favor! This is the cloth of power!”

“Ala’s gift is not mine to give,” Abeba states. “I will grant you, Ade, my youngest child. He is a gift, I can give!”

“No! Not someone else’s child! I want my own child! I want my body to conceive and be as fruitful as any tree! Oh, Ala! Pity me!

Skies darken on the jabbed mountain peaks as Abeba puts the red cloth over her head. Warm air whiffs and whistles through the trees swirling leaves, dry and green, in all directions. As the dark clouds shuffle in the sky, specks of light flicker in the distance.

“There’s a storm a coming!” Abeba calls out as she hurries to unpin and gather the clothes from the line. A flock of chirping birds flutter overhead flying low as the sky turn a into honey mustard. Two dogs jump up and down scurrying and barking around Abeba’s feet.

“Shoo, dogs!” She kicks at them, ripping off more clothes off the line. A white cloth gets caught on the open mesh of the line and Abeba tugs hard tearing a long strip into it.

“Damn!”

Lighting bolts streak across the sky and jumbo drops of rain begin to fall. Abeba rushes into the wooden-framed house and drops the clothes on a bed. She runs back outdoors into the yard gathering the rest of the clothes.

“Rain! Rain! Rain! Children, come! Here comes the rain!”

Abeba’s nine children emerge from various directions of the spacious yard, in groups of threes and twos, indifferent to the rainfall that is quickly picking up speed. The children walk in single file as they come towards their mother. She picks up the youngest child, Ade, removing the red cloth from her head and wraps it around him.

“Mama, Yeshe was watching us, like a hawk.”

“Oh, she was, was she? How was she watching you like a hawk? Oh, don’t tell me!

She was flying over the trees.’

“She was hiding in the bushes. Yemi saw her. Then she ran away. I was scared, Mama.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t be scared, baby. Yeshe is our cousin. She was probably picking tea leaves.”

Ade places his head on his mother’s shoulders seeking comfort and reassurance. Abeba and her children enter the house, where sundry sizes of baskets with a variety of

cloths of assorted colors, textiles, blends and patterns line every corner. The children go off to different corners of the house in the same assemblage of threes and twos gathering clusters of the fabrics to huddle on.

Abeba goes about the house closing windows and doors. The rain and wind picks up outside, trees sway to and fro. As she closes the last window, she does not see her cousin, Yeshi, who stands outside in the rain waving at her.

It is Market Day and there are people everywhere, flowing in from the dusty road like different rivers flow into seas. Abeba unwraps the Grant-I-May-Live Cloth from her head, placing it over her face to protect her face from the sun. Soon, she falls asleep in the hot midday sun. Abeba's children are playing a distance from her stall and soon become bored with the game. Seeing their mother asleep with the loose cloth over her face, they tiptoe over to the stall and stealthily take the cloth from their mother's face. They race through the marketplace with the cloth over their heads, with sticks and whips in their hands, frightening and harrowing the people, overturning the stalls and carts of the marketplace.

Yeshi watches. The children run behind her stalls, and she corners them, grabbing the cloth and whips from their hands. She quickly wraps the cloth on her head and gave each child a lash of their whips. The children cry out for their mother, who sleeps at the far end of the market way out of earshot from her children's cries. A bystander witnesses the beating of the children and runs to awaken and inform Abeba of her children's mischief and consequence.

When Abeba reaches the scene, Yeshe is gone from the market place with the Cloth. Abeba finds her children in pain behind Yeshe's stalls of salted meats, looking like slaughtered lambs waiting to be hung before the killing. She is overcome with grief and as she examines her children's whip-scarred skin, her body tingles with the memory of that last lash that was inflicted on her nearly nine years ago. Abeba grows weak and falls on the salted ground cradling her children. Many of the villagers in the marketplace rush to help her and the children to their feet, back to the cloth stall and eventually home, with the dozen baskets of cloths.

Abeba and her children are ailing with illness. People are coming in and going out of her house and the marketplace. The elders congregate to discuss divinations and what masks would drive out all bad things- the sickness and the bewilderment affecting Abeba and her children. Every day, the villagers make themselves useful preparing medicines, potions and putting out fires in the fields.

"This is no doing, we want to leave undone."

No one sees or hears of Yeshe after she steals Abeba's Cloth. The people of Eyodora are worried and afraid. Yeshe is known to have malice in her heart and is most likely to rush into havoc and misfortune. The Grant-I-May-Live Cloth will be lost from them for another nine years and the rain has not come for quite some time and Ala's wrath will be even more severe when or if at all she returns.

"What has happened to Yeshe?" Abeba asks her visitors. "She has the ropes of life in her hands."

The men and women offer her bits of lamb's liver for nourishment. They go into the forest to look for Yeshi and find stripes and fibers of the crimson cloth leading to the mouth of a cave but Yeshi is no where to be found. They search the forest with sniffing dogs as far as humans could endeavor, where the 'death stick' is placed across earth's floor, which can be used to summon the spirits of the dead and to reveal oneself as invisible. No one is known to have crossed and returned..

"We have looked for her everywhere," they inform Abeba upon their return. 'Surely, she is more than missing.'

Yeshi is following the path of the moonlight, leaping from mountain to mountain. At sun's light, she hides in the shadows of looming trees on the other side of the "death's stick." The pure Grant-I-May-Live Cloth crimson cloth turns into stripes of snakeskin, pelts and leather. It carries the aura of powerful animals encrusted with their skulls, dried pond mud, blood and patchworks edged of red rickrack borders. Yeshi wears the cloth faceless, draped from head to toe resembling an unfortunate sacrificial offering.

One night, she returns to the village to seduce her husband to plant the seeds of fertility into the dry regions of her womb. Her husband is frightened and is not aroused by her violent lovemaking. Yeshi accuses him of infidelity, wraps the tattered crimson cloth around her and returns to the sacred forest beyond where the "death stick" is placed to wait out her fate.

"No!" Abeba declares, hearing the news. "The cloth must be retrieve. For Ala's sake! In it is woven the web of life. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together, no matter what patterns we make."

She is frail with sickness and powerless without her cloth, but she drags herself to the end of the village to her cousin's house despite the villagers' protests.

"Yeshi has ceased seeing herself as part of the fabric of life," she declares to the village. "She is setting herself apart from it as we set apart those who are different than us. A flower's worth in being a flower is to pass its pollen onto the bees, birds and grazing animals. Help me to bring Yeshi back to the fold!"

The villagers nod their heads in agreement. They follow the instructions of Abeba to capture nine crows from Yeshi's coop. Under the akooko tree in the center of the village, eight of the crows are slaughtered and their blood drained on a white cloth that Abeba has last loomed.

"Shadows come and shadows go, owing allegiance to no one. But when shadow faces sun, shadow reveals the face of someone. Show us where Yeshi has gone!"

Abeba releases the ninth crow into the air.

"Crow, fly low and fly high. Become this old woman's eyes."

She wraps the bloodstained cloth on her head and lays down staring into the sun, following the path of the bird, as it soars.

THE MKUNGA OF MOUZALAND

Every one in Mouzaland knows old Odu. She is the Mkunga, the woman who brings children in world. She is called upon whenever a pregnant woman goes into labor, and everyone in Mouzaland calls upon her.

Odu lives alongside the foot of Usambara Mountains close to the Umba River in the Mouzaland region of East Africa. It is by the river that most women will find her making prayers whenever any of the village women goes about giving birth. Some of the women have slipped and slid down the path when in great haste to fetch Odu and some have literally come rolling down the mountainside landing safely by her house or on the riverbanks.

And every one in Mouzaland also knows that old Odu has never given birth to any child of her own. Some people say that Odu is “cursed in the womb” because she is barren of child. Others have just accepted her infertility as part of life. Odu wavers between acceptance and denial and often questions this notion of fate while secretly praying that one day she will miraculously give birth to a baby to call her own. However, she tells everyone that she is blessed with the greater gift of life to help other women with birthing their babies and keeping the children alive.

For as long as Odu has been the Mkunga, she has never lost a child in birth. She spends most of her days between childbirth brewing herbs for sick and invalid children, making gifts of honey and watermelon for the Umba River and singing to the river goddess.

Oya, I pray
Oya please stay

Blow your winds in
And let the mist out
Give breath to earth
And death to birth!
Oya, I pray
Oya, please stay
Plant leaves to trees
Strong women to breed
And children to feed!

One night, Odu was sleeping in her riverside hut when she heard a loud throbbing knock on her door. It was late at night but she was used to being awakened in the middle of the night so she thought nothing of it, rolled out of bed and answered the door. At her door, stood a tall figure dressed in a Dogon ceremonial mask and layered in the cloth of contention.

The figure was not visibly male or female but Odu who is a patron of the masquerade tradition understood that whether a spirit or a human, the tall figure wanted to disguise its identity and preserve its privacy, so she simply and humbly bowed. Everyone knows the transformative power of the Dogon mask, that it can be used to lose the human form or identity and turn one into a spirit. Everyone also knows that when a spirit comes calling, you are being summoned to do something mythical and miraculous.

“Odu,” the figure spoke. “You must come with me.”

She bowed again and reached for her Maia birthing bag, a giant satchel that sat on a small table by the door. The contents of her Maia bag rattled with bottles and tinctures of herbs, oils and clay drinks. The woman grabbed a white cloth that she used as shawl from behind the door. As she pulled the shawl towards her, it tore, and the cloth turned from white to black, and flung itself around her shoulders. Odu did not raise an eyebrow

as she took a last look in the mirror before she closed the door. The black cloth wrapped itself tighter around her shoulders and seemed to push her forward.

She wanted to get a better look at her caller who stood in sculptural form at the door. Odu thought that the figure must be Djinn because she could not see any semblance of a face under the mask. And while she was scared, she dared not show it. Everyone in Mouzaland knows that when a Djinn appears to just follow because you cannot escape the force of a Djinn. The Djinn must have read her thoughts and seized her hand quickly pulling her along the river mountainside. He was moving very rapidly and Odu began to tremble both out of fear and the cold of the night.

Trekking through rustic villages and the trails of the Usambara Mountains, Odu followed wondering whether the Djinn knew which direction he should head in or if he could not find his way back to where he wanted to take her. As they traveled through the night, Odu tried to get a closer look at the Djinn to see if she could recognize his origin but the night light gave her no clue and the Djinn always managed to grab or push her towards whatever directions he wanted her to take. No matter what direction the Djinn took, Odu obeyed and walked as quickly as her old long legs could take her. The winding paths were taking a toll on her body but Odu had a strong will and mind.

After traveling for quite a distance, Odu realized that the Djinn did not intend to harm her and so little by little, she started to feel better about her journey and thought it was pretty adventurous. So she began to sing her song:

Oya, I pray
Oya please stay
Blow your winds in
And let the mist out
Give breath to earth
And death to birth!

Oya, I pray
Oya, please stay
Plant leaves to trees
Strong women to breed
And children to feed!

“Hush!” The Djinn warned.

Odu shuddered. She had hoped that the Djinn would have recognized the song and joined her, and then they could have had some camaraderie on what seemed to be an endless journey. By now, she knew they were way out of Mouzaland, as she did not recognize any of the paths they were trekking. They had left the river path and were traversing through unfamiliar terrains. Just as she thought, “I hope I can find my way back home,” they reached the top of the mountain when the Djinn slowed down to rest under a Baobab tree. In the distance, she saw a beautiful palace glowing in colored lights against the backdrop of another mountainside. Her jaw dropped because she had never seen anything like this before. As she was about to capture the breath-taking view, the Djinn pushed her further along towards the palace.

When they approached the palace Odu took in the magical aura that surrounded the structure made of mud, river stones and other precious stones. An army of Djinn dressed in the same Dogon masks and cloths of contention as her Djinn wore, met them. The figures were not visibly males or females but Odu studied them stealthily as she walked along with her Djinn steering the course. The figures lowered their heads as she and the Djinn passed, which confirmed to Odu that the Djinn was indeed of a powerful stature.

Silently, she followed the Djinn through many courts and halls of the palace. Floors, ceilings and walls were made out of the red earth, river stones, and more precious

stones. They entered a large room where an extraordinarily beautiful Djinn, clearly a woman, wearing a Kwere mask, sat on the side of a bed that looked like a porcelain-like shrine adorned with cowry shells and ivory. A dozen women wearing similar Kwere masks surrounded the room buzzing like bees on a honeycomb. The woman was a Mamatoto, which is what women in labor are called. She was in latent labor so Odu knew she had a little time to prepare the Mamatoto for active birthing.

“Breathe easy.”

The Djinn shouted orders to the other Djinn in a language that Odu had not heard before and exited the room. Soon all of the Djinn hand maidens left the room scurrying. Odu set out to work and got a dozen snails, a bowl of Shea butter, a flask of palm oil, a bottle of honey, a jar of red clay and two kola nuts from her Maia bag.

As she worked, she sang:

Oya, I pray
Oya please stay
Blow your winds in
And let the mist out
Give breath to earth
And death to birth!
Oya, I pray
Oya, please stay
Plant leaves to trees
Strong women to breed
And children to feed!

Soon the Djinn hand maidens scurried back into the large room with large calabashes and gourds of water along with dozens of beautiful fabric and fibers for Odu to use during and after the birthing. Odu took only the things that she was most familiar with placing them on immaculate a table that the handmaidens had cleared off. As she

tended to the Mamatoto, she noticed that the woman's belly was quite large, much larger than women bearing twins and growing larger as time elapsed.

Every few minutes, the Mamatoto's stomach would contract in to an almost normal size stomach and then she would gasp for air and the stomach would release out with a greater stretch. Odu examined her stomach, placing both hands around it, on top and underneath. The stomach was a large mass and continued to increase with each contraction. For the short time that Odu had been in the room, she counted eight contractions and with each contraction, the stomach would grow.

Odu was a bit worrisome for she had never seen such a thing before but she showed no sign as she worked. As the contractions got more intense, Odu assisted Mamatoto off the bed and walked her around the room, breathing with her; or laid her down to rest while she rubbed palm oil and Shea butter on her stomach. She gave her clay medicines to drink for the labor pains and applied swabs of warm water on her face and stomach, all the while singing her song.

Naturally, the Djinn handmaidens' ears caught the melody of the song and began to chant the sounds of the song with Odu. Before long, the song of the Mkunga of Mouzaland filled the palace walls and spread across the mountains. The song was whimsical and beautiful yet bombastic and the Mamatoto began to dance.

Oya, I pray
Oya please stay
Blow your winds in
And let the mist out
Give breath to earth
And death to birth!
Oya, I pray
Oya, please stay
Plant leaves to trees
Strong women to breed

And children to feed!

The Mamatoto swayed and swaggered, rocking herself out of labor and into the position of birth. She kept a good rhythm and pace circling hips in rhythmic undulations, tuning out all fears and distractions and rolling her belly to the beat of her contractions. Her body drew heat and cold at the same time. Thawing drops appeared on her body running fluidly down and falling to sweat at her feet.

When the Mamatoto was about to surrender to the birth muscle, Odu laid her down on the bed, took two snails and placed them on each side of the Mamatoto's stomach. The snails moved slowly towards each other. When they reached the Mamatoto's navel, they shredded their shells and disappeared into the navel. The woman glided off the bed with the help of the handmaidens, who continued to buzz around the room trying to follow whatever command or order that the Mkunga summoned.

Legs spread wide open across the grand palace floor, the Mamatoto uttered a great moan with a smile and a little Djinn was born. And old Odu was there to receive the newborn. She worked quickly and skillfully, wrapping fibers and breaking cords, cleaning the Mamatoto with warm water cloth, then bathing the child with great care and rubbing palm oil and Shea butter for warmth and moisture. It was a clearly a male Djinn child with the same sculptural form as the Djinn who had summoned her and she had hardly finished her task of moisturizing the child when it sprayed urine right into the singing Mkunga's mouth. A slight yawn revealed a small birthmark on the child's tongue that she thought she had seen before.

The Mamatoto had fallen into a fatigue sleep from her rigorous birth and dance. The handmaidens were busy bustling around the porcelain-like shrine not knowing what

to do. As Odu was about to hand the baby over to one of the smiling handmaidens, the woman made a loud groan and awoke from her fatigue sleep. With hands shoved down on the bed, she lifted her body completely up off the bed and with one full thrust another baby Djinn pushed its big head out onto the porcelain-like shrine. This surprised everyone in the room except for Odu who immediately set to work again, swiftly and adroitly, casing fibers and flouting cords, cleaning the Mamatoto with balmy water cloth, then bathing the child with great care.

She did not have time to moisten the child Djinn with Shea butter and palm because the Mamatoto uttered a louder groan, assuming the same position as before, lifted her body off the bed and with full throttle excreted another big head. Odu placed the second child with another handmaiden and went about her child-birthing work on the third child. The woman gave birth to one child, later to another, and another, and finally there were a great number of children. As each child was born, a herd of palace people had found themselves in the chamber of the new mother and joined in the chorus of Odu's song.

Oya, I pray
Oya please stay
Blow your winds in
And let the mist out
Give breath to earth
And death to birth!
Oya, I pray
Oya, please stay
Plant leaves to trees
Strong women to breed
And children to feed!

By the birth of the twelfth child, the first child had stopped breathing air and laid still in the young handmaiden's arms. The young girl had suffocated the child as she was

unfamiliar with newborns and had actually forgotten that she was holding a living being during the excitement of the other births.

When the excitement was over and the birthing was done, the Mamatoto fell into a deep smiling sleep. The Djinn returned to the room and took the dead child from the handmaiden, who was shaking with fear. Everyone in the room bowed in silence, except for Odu, who had never lost a child in childbirth. She had tried hard to resuscitate the child when she realized that it was not breathing, but no palm oil or clay drinks or snails could bring it back to life. She watched sadly as the Djinn left the room.

Odu stayed in the palace for the rest of the night, instructing the handmaidens how to care for the eleven newborns. When the Djinn thought that her work was done, he ordered the handmaidens to pack her Maia birth bag. Then he escorted her out of the palace and walked her back to the other mountain where she had attempted to rest under the baobab tree.

“Odu,” he said. “You can find your way home from here.”

Odu was about to protest when the Djinn turned towards his palace and simply disappeared. When she looked towards the mountain, the palace had also disappeared. Odu could not believe her eyes. She stood there for quite awhile looking at the dramatic and lush landscapes that dominated the mountains where a beautiful palace once stood. A light rain began to fall as she headed down the steep path.

She found her way back home quite easily and upon entering her cabin, she discovered her table covered with many coins of silver and gold, jewelry, and necklaces of precious stones. She stood stunningly admiring the gifts of gold and jewelry. She slipped off the shawl and hung it on the back of the door. Once she placed the shawl on

the doornail, the color changed from black to white. It was in that moment of wonderment that she heard a baby's cry coming from her bedroom. She rushed to the room and on her bed laid a child wrapped in swatches of fabric and fibers. The wailing child opened its mouth widely to reveal a mark on its tongue.

Odu picked up the child and smiled into its face singing and dancing around the house in high fervor.

Oya, I pray
Oya please stay
Blow your winds in
And let the mist out
Give breath to earth
And death to birth!

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